

EIN AMERIKANISCHER TRAUM



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Forward

This is the first edition of this book prepared for wide circulation, complete with full color artwork, courtesy of the insuperable Dane Sell. This book, in almost totality, was written in the dark days of November of 2020, during a period of prolonged unemployment. I would like to thank my parents for providing me a room to sleep in during that time. In its current state there are editorial flaws which doubtless persist despite my consistent efforts. Complaints and suggestions can be addressed, as of this edition, to the twitter profile @JohnBar35687700. The subject matter of this book is generally unpleasant and deals with some of the worse moments of the human experience, which although better ignored in daily life, should never be forgotten nor minimized.

This book is dedicated to you, dear reader.

“The German soul has a place for the glorification of brute force, for the notion of war as a colossal looting campaign. That is all it holds. It is not much... All her principles are based on one idea, namely: That right and morality are not the same for all, that there are privileged individuals who may deliver themselves from their shackles. It is a wicked theory; it cannot be too strongly opposed. From head to heel, Germany was tainted with this spirit. It assumed the importance of a dogma. ... The worst means were sanctified by her if used to this end.”

-Ferdinand Foch

The missile knows where it is at all times. It knows this because it knows where it isn't. By subtracting where it is from where it isn't, or where it isn't from where it is (whichever is greater), it obtains a difference, or deviation. The guidance subsystem uses deviations to generate corrective commands to drive the missile from a position where it is to a position where it isn't, and arriving at a position where it wasn't, it now is. Consequently, the position where it is, is now the position that it wasn't, and it follows that the position that it was, is now the position that it isn't.

In the event that the position that it is in is not the position that it wasn't, the system has acquired a variation, the variation being the difference between where the missile is, and where it wasn't. If variation is considered to be a significant factor, it too may be corrected by the GEA. However, the missile must also know where it was.

The missile guidance computer scenario works as follows. Because a variation has modified some of the information the missile has obtained, it is not sure just where it is. However, it is sure where it isn't, within reason, and it knows where it was. It now subtracts where it should be from where it wasn't, or vice-versa, and by differentiating this from the algebraic sum of where it shouldn't be, and where it was, it is able to obtain the deviation and its variation, which is called error.

-United States Air Force Training Video

1: The Fool



Ashes spilled into his mouth, fine at first, but bitter tasting and then grittier and grittier. He kept his eyes tightly closed, refusing to see, but he could feel the powdery gray waste cover his face and nose, feel its grease and smell the overpowering smell that could not be there but somehow was. He couldn't seem to shut his mouth, as it filled, fuller and fuller, and the bitter taste turned to burning lye. He could feel more than grit in the paste of blood and white ash now, and the painful crunch of what had once been teeth cut into his gums as he choked on the cone of ruin in his throat. The rain continued around him, up to his thighs and elbows, and his tears cut gorges down into the ashen face-mask. It was the breathless sensation of aspirating, dead air building his lungs, fires inside him, no more hope. He broke and panic forced his eyes open, Eli Eli Lama Sabachthani... eyes opening into a gray world of pain and burning, flooding with white light...

The train bounced a little again, jostling Commodore of Naval Intelligence Josia Wenschler awake. Again light flooded his eyes. This time he managed to keep them open, slowly adjusting to the great white sun in that clear blue sky, not dimmed by soot or smog like in the cities back home. There must have been some little dents in the rails, shoddy repairs after a bandit raid, maybe back from when there had been real fighting here. The crimson painted coach was rounding a sharp curve, across a river bridge. The rounded silver mirror which shone in the sun was uncreatively called "Winding River". Around the distant engine car, already over the bridge he could see the grains just starting to bulge at the head, pale yellow and green over the rolling fields. The wrought iron bridge, straight clean lines, well engineered and sturdy was passing under him now, and the wide arch of the guard was like a doorway, whose searchlight's polished lens gleamed in the sun like a brass bell on some great house in the Capitol, but there was no marble out here, just timber and iron, simple and hard. From the angle of the sun on his face, it must have been starting to push from midday into late afternoon. He gave a foolish smile, welcoming the warm glow. There was already noticeably less light in the sky at this hour than there had been even two weeks ago, and some nights already had a hint of autumn's teeth. But still there were weeks of sun before the ground would dissolve in the late fall rains and the frost would stalk farms like a wolf.

He had only boarded the train that morning, which meant they were making good time, as the chained forts-*cum*-town was already emerging on the riverside. His pupils narrowed on the shadows of the riverbed, the reeds and trees and the rocks. A family legend said that one of his grandfather had been a scout in the area when their civilization had strode forth into what had once been a totally wild land. If that was true, that ancestor had been a bigger fool than even Jo. What had he thought he'd find out here? Christmas? There hadn't even been real buildings in those days when pioneers had crossed frontier bridges, just swarms of the angry reds, holding onto their shacks in the muck and mire.

The place had been something else for the red men and savages who lived in the mud and muck of the river in those days, but now it was Fort Schlieper. At least that was what it was called on the rail maps. Fort Fern was his destination, located only half a klick away from the titular Schlieper, but on the far side of the town. Schlieper had, at any given time, between five and nine actual forts manned by different groups, cultists, trade companies, competing rail lines, the navy, the army, a dozen local militias, and fundamentalists. The stone walls, draped with fifty different banners, booming fifty hymns and chants, all shared one thing- the raw concrete faces that stared grimly out to the countryside farms. They made a rough crescent against the

southern branch of the river, and most of the tall buildings and market shops including the station fell within their cold embrace. Though their stolid visages seemed to betray practicality, they were more like a general, a clown, or a high society hat: their pointless walls encrusted with glistening gunports of chrome and brass, and laced with ribbons of red, white, black, gold; every color that could be printed or painted under this territorial sun. As his carriage passed between a couple of the stone beasts, he felt the same chill he always did, which had nothing to do with the setting sun's red rays. It was the chill of the garrisoned frontier past, which even now scarred this well-civilized and peaceful town. He had to chuckle at such superstitious association, nothing more than a bad joke.

He was already picturing a hot cup of coffee, steam mixing with nicotine vapor, served by a stodgy old station waiter. Just a little pickup for the walk to the fort, past the little town's buildings. Out here they were still mostly wood and bricks of cream yellow. Delicate panes of glass, so expensive to move over land, and stunning arches of steel saved for the new and the rich. In theory, there was still the hazard of an occasional raid from the swamps and forests where the few unbowed savages still haunted, but whatever gunpowder and fire they'd once had was gone and so they posed little real threat to the intimidating fortress walls. A peaceful area these days- but few passengers on this early fall train heading to the great frontier had ever even entered the territories, and they seemed ill at ease. An elderly man in some faded uniform gripped his armrest tightly with one hand, while his other sleeve hung hollow and vacant. One couple was paying too much attention to their gloved hands; a thin man in a black greatcoat and immense felt hat kept nervously glancing out the window; and one matronly woman kept talking to her children in a loud voice that belied any calm conveyed by her prim demeanor. He was a seasoned hand- this wasn't his first tour, or even his fiftieth. Scars and liver spots meant that the back of his left hand was more alien to him than this great expanse of land, his manifest destiny. He chuckled bitterly- how many destinies had it swallowed whole? Even before he'd served in the territories, he'd grown big exploring the wild hills and forests nearer to home.

The train breaks ground to a halt at the platform, sounding its long whistle just as the sun hit the line of tall fort walls. He stood up, shaking the pins out of his legs, stomping his polished boots twice, and then swung his bags over his shoulders. Stepping out into the sunset drenched cream brick, he found the simple building picturesque. More comfortable for him, by far, than the choking decadence of engraved marble and kaleidoscopic mix of monumental buildings, frescos, mosaic murals, and festival societies found in the Capitol under that looming shadow of the great marble dome. He remembered a book he had managed to smuggle somehow, which had described some ancient Babylon as a "White Sepulchre", the kind of decadently rich prose that landed it on a proscription list.

The train was far from full, and the passengers were reluctant to move onto the hard ground, so there was no rush out of the doors. The station was quiet at this time of day- the night trains to the east wouldn't start running for hours and hours yet, and the westbound trains weren't packed full of people whose luck hadn't panned out at this time of year. Still, there was a low bustle to the station. The few coffee stands with a couple murmuring conversations, new arrivals and townsfolk getting reacquainted over caffeine-rich steam, and whiffs of tobacco. A reflex struck- he patted down his pockets and thighs, checking for his papers, watch, wallet, handgun, and

then glancing at the briefcase in his hand to make sure it was there, that it had the bulge of his packages, then patting his head, the pressed hat with its stiff peak and brim, and the epaulettes making ridges under his heavy greatcoat. On this train, out here, in the sleepy town, he cut quite a figure. His boot's black shine, his riding pant's deep blue pressed with their red trim, dipping out from the slate gray greatcoat, above his tan and clean face up to the white peaked cap with its ornaments of midnight leather, silver, and gold. To stand out so overdressed invited the tail he must have picked up leaving the capitol, and likely would attract more the closer he came to the frontier's dark and bloody ground. Discomfort at the pathological paranoia, the fear of a tail, swept him. He stilled his gut, tensing the muscles in his abdomen, and let it pass. Doing so, he felt calmer for it. The weight of his belt, holster hung from it, was as reassuring as anything else, and he felt like a fine king's court jester in his gaudy uniform, graced by the sinking sunlight.

He checked his watch, its long gold hands marking second after second. It read half past four, which gave him an hour before he would be expected at Fern. As much out of courtesy to the tail, as to indulge himself he went to pull up a seat at one of the cafes. He thumbed through the table menu, signaled the staff that he'd take a dark coffee and a fresh pipe bowl. An old man, one-armed and gray-haired, obliged after a moment and brought him over the local blends- the coffee, a bit stale, and the pipe, flavored with lemon. The obsession out here for lemon was something else- he knew that out on the distant Northern frontier the citrus were worth their weight in gold, but even further south where they grew on trees, they were prized for color and size. Once he'd attached the bowl however, the hot citrus fumes and the strong drink shocked his brain back to tack. He could feel his blood coursing hard in his arteries against his tight collar- a good, reliable reminder that he was alive. No cruel king or angry norn had cut the thread of his fate left. Perhaps he was being kept alive for some cruel joke; perhaps simple to enjoy the delicious coffee and heady vapor. His eyes tracked across the station to the other stands with their specialty pastries and soups, searching and investigating the personages who peopled the station.

They said that doppelgangers symbolized death- old Skull and Bones with his scythe and hood would send them to you beforehand as a sign. An omen, maybe, or simply a mirror- your face concealing death beneath it, the laughing skull which would emerge from the rudy flesh. Sometimes he felt as if he was some kind of doppelganger for the whole country- looks that somehow were bland and unimposing, unnoticeable, perfectly average, but animated with a spark that all the wall paintings of the old world and all the great portraits of the historic generals and leaders tried to capture. Call it navel-gazing, call it vainglory, but there was always a tick of disgust from seeing other people with no feature to distinguish them. A homogenized, unified state of being, it could be called. Of course, down South there was quite a difference of people, and pages of reminiscences of the warm beaches and ripe figs. But here, in this station he expected familiarity- the same builds and heights and shaves and hairlines he had grown up with, that he had only just gotten off the train with, the same that he saw in the mirror every morning. A foolish, fancy, but death at every corner- tails and agents and plots behind every desk in the Capitol- it was fit for a nation made of doppelgangers. Perhaps that was why the slim man in the black coat who had followed him off the carriage, who had sat down simultaneously across the tracks from him and was now staring at an apple tart was so shocking- not the presence, but the utter lack of a doppelganger.

The man had the same cut of coat, the same comically oversize hat, and the same elongated frame as he had worn before on the train. Yet he swore that the man on the train had been an easy peg for some business dandy or political snake-close-set eyes, a thin nose and a city dweller's sour, clean face that had twitched under the expansive sky. The figure across the tracks from him however was different. Under the huge felt hat there was a great forking black beard and angry looking eyebrows that jutted from his face in great peaks. The face was heavysset, dripping with fat, but above a fit frame, characteristic of frontier flesh melted by years of drinking and icy wind. He swept the rest of the station, the waiting areas outside the glass doors, even glancing at the train windows- no sign of anyone he could have missed. And the hat had to be the same. He sucked in another lungfull of citrus vapors. It was possible, very likely even, that this was a trick of the mind. There had been two men on the train and he had missed the exit of the clean-shaven chap. Or maybe, one had stolen the other's hat, and left without a fuss. The improbability of the antique hat made him uneasy. Another puff, another suck.

Could he be misremembering the face from the train? Could it have gotten jumbled with a different face? Swapped a city dweller for a frontier race, used to the uniformity of the faces in the Capitol after too many recent months of deskwork and boozing? This in fact was very disturbing. If his memory was starting to give out... another exhale, another inhale. The orange light in the bowl was dimming, giving out... Perhaps it was a tail, some personnel tracker from the Capitol sent to smoke out whatever the navy (or perhaps a rogue officer) was doing here. The risks of taking three months of excursion to get to his new post. Could it be the man was a master of disguise who had swapped faces? The face had changed, but the outfit was left intact and distinctive. His lungs deflated, longing for the warm buzz of the pipe. If it was a devilish tail, it was best ignored for the moment. If it wasn't, if it was less an omen than a "symptom", it was best ignored too. Let a vacation to the frontier unkink the mind. So, he told himself, it was just chance. Two felt hats of the same make. Nothing more to it. Repeat that 10 times, start to fake belief. He downed the coffee dregs, black against the white porcelain vanishing into a mosaic smear of grounds, and got up to leave. What did they put in the tobacco here, hidden by that lemon burst? Another dangerous line of thought... The only people who could have wanted him had to be (he told himself over and over) much weaker than his imagination led him to fear. Be reasonable, and we'll get out of this he thought. Seven til five by his ticking mechanical heart. Time to take a walk to the riverside.

An etched brass plate hanging from iron bars announced that "Fort Fern was the furthest inland naval fort in the territories." It had indeed been that, for about two years. As the wise men who ran the navy soon found, transport costs had increased as the frontier grew, and the volume of wheat and tobacco and cotton, wood and iron, and anything else that was worth thinking about (-and some *things* that were best left unthought) had skyrocketed, forts had sprung up along the rivers. Like rich veins under bare skin they stretched, arteries on maps and across fields. But such beautiful and precious things, the navy had sagely concluded, could not be left freely open. The red savages still made the occasional gesture of resistance, and of course there were the more civilized breeds of bandits and political bushwackers. And of course, someone had to make sure that the flots of lumber and barges of iron kept moving. That was how fools like him were sent on errand sojourns to these distant lands, and ones more distant yet- *hic sunt dracones*.

Patrol boats, chariots for such fools, ballasted with cannons and marines were stationed along the vital waterways. Wherever they docked, the high command made sure to build a hard place, uncomfortable to sleep in and ugly to look at. Being the first far inland fort to be built, when the navy wasn't as learned in the ways of ugly construction, Fern was almost shapely- although no sane man would have called the old lady's squat configuration beautiful. The old gun barrels that pointed ominously down the river towards bandit-ridden swamps would have been gathering rust by now if the neurotic men on duty hadn't spent sixty years obsessively polishing them at all hours. This wasn't surprising- despite the name, this fort was a posting that the blue water men kept for themselves, and unlike the landlubber marines, the ship captains mostly all came from the old inbreed stock of the North-East- just like he did.

Arriving at the stockade gate, black iron set against the hard stone walls, he waved at the gate sergeant, then whistled, then stomped and kicked the gate swearing, before finally yelling out that he was looking for Commodore Arnie Weorsaske. The unfortunately named Commodore came from a family of wolga-deutsch. A more savvy family might have invented better name, free of Russian-butchered consonants, but dumb slavic obstinacy- or german pride- had stuck with them (depending on how you felt about the clan) resulted in Weorsaske's grandfather drunkenly slurring out in something the R&S immigration office took at face value. At least the old coot had bought himself and his brothers naval commissions when they had arrived in the country. Along with the commissions, the strange name and the strong accent stuck with Weorsaske's old man and had then been passed down to him. No one was really sure how the name was said, and perhaps all the Weorsaske's changed it routinely, just to throw off anyone who was starting to catch on. He had met Arnie in the Naval Academy, training on a sloop as old as time itself, where they had made fast friends mucking up the rigging. The private part of private correspondence didn't mean so much these days, and even less for officers in the armed forces, and they didn't write to each other often, but they always got back together by drinking as if someone had died, and sometimes, in fact, because someone really had died. There was no longer a fear of a binge interrupting a memorized sequence of coordinates or navigating flag rules, but now they had to be wary of the rocky shoals of hangovers.

After a good half minute of increasingly painful kicks the gate swung stiffly open, and a Sergeant stepped out to salute him. Upon returning the salute, with what was a sycophantic grin or a homicidal glare, the unflappable gate-guard mentioned that Cmdr "Veususke" was overseeing a match at the barracks. When he pressed the Sergeant, he got nothing more than a placid smile and a repetition. The man was probably hitting an opium pipe between shifts in this snooze of a town. Somewhat annoyed at the pain in his toes, he passed through the gatehouse towards the heart of Fern. In all, four acres were enclosed by the walls, offering plenty of sheltered space. The armory and barracks buildings were clear enough, located square in the middle of the rectangular lawn. From there the walls stretched horizontally out making a fortified strip along the river twice as long as it was wide, and rather sensually flowing with riverbends. Entering from the town gate, the far wall had a long building up against it, where small river boats could enter, fuel, and be stored in the cold winters. Neat gravel paths connected everything in plain straight lines and right angles. Green grass was predominant, complimented by juniper hedges in jade rows - ideal demarcation for a ball field. Another series of long and low brick buildings were almost

camouflaged against the distant wall. Beyond them, his destination towered into the sky, rising above the walls.

A survey and fire tower rose in a steeple above the congregated soldiers who crowded around the base of the commodore's quarters with jeers and raised fists. On the stairway of the tower, a small table was set up. Like a preacher at the pulpit, Weorsaske was leading the troops in jeering chants. Not wanting to disturb the mystifying proceedings, he kept a low profile, hunkering around the back of the crowd. Young men, close cut haircuts, short blonde beards, beer bellies, and naked muscles bulged in the crowd, and the energy of mob violence, organized into spectacle, struck him like the must of the rivermen's sweat. A cage of iron bars and timber planks joined the spire and the roof of Arnies reinforced lodging, and inside the strange cage he saw two shirtless young men, the same dirty blond crew cut faces as the crowd, muscles gleaming with blood and sweat, rippling with every gyrating thrust of a fist. The young men were going at each other mann gegen mann, *mano a mano*, with cloth wrapped fists, forced in close by the jagged cold metal and splintered wood of the tower. At another time, such bloodsport and lax security proceedings would have been a serious problem, but after months pushing paper for some bureaucratic weevil, he felt himself caught up in the raucous air and the smell of blood and masculine fight. To see men in the Capitol play at this would have been perverse, but here in the restorative hardship of a rural expanse, the authentic fort-town even as tame as it was these days- well. He could feel his skin itch with excitement, memories of his own more violent and foolhardy youth. Pulling his briefcase and sack over his back, he leapt up onto the flat brick roof of Arnie's home and quickly scaled the rough cage of the tower. His arms felt the bite of the climb with eagerness, matched only by his wide smile as he swung onto the tower platform, offering part of the precious briefcase's contents- an amber brown bottle of cognac- to the startled Arnie.

Arnie looked up, smiling at first. Then he turned a red as dark as the brandy, and with chunks of spittle streaking his great gray mustache screamed "What the fuck do you think you're doing you rat bastard!" and he gestured out to the suddenly silent crowd. Only the grunts and slams of the fighting men below remained. "What goddam moron of a soldier invited one of the four-eyed pricks from intelligence out here?" He added, with a voice of menacing threat, "I'll confiscate their rum ration for a month and hand it out to the crowd tonight! Inform!" Suddenly, a high pitched voice from a boyish lieutenant in the back of the crowd sounded out- "Sir, it was your sir!" Weorsaske made an exaggerated gesture of comic relief, slapping his forehead and stumbling backwards as if in shock. "I should flay you alive for informing on a brother officer, sir!" he yelled out at the lieutenant, but then gestured. "Just bring the men my rum ration, eh? Fitting punishment!" Then men cheered loudly. Now Arnie gestured back down to the cage. "Don't stop on my account! No rest for the wicked! Fifty silver eagles that Jonas goes down inside a minute" and he tossed some cash over the cage towards the crowd. Rhythmic chanting from the men soon laid itself over the constant pounding blows of the fight beneath. He took a seat and poured out the brandy into the tall glass that had been hiding in his bag. "Well, Arnie, you dipshit..." he began jokingly "you can drink my brandy for now. But when we run out, where will you turn for relief, with no rum to comfort you?" As he was pouring Arnie a full glass, his friend laughed. "I gave up my ration... but I've still got my Magda's" and with this introduction to an unfamiliar name, he tapped his nose slyly.

Jonas, it turned out, did not go down in under a minute, and the three minute bell rang shortly after, indicating that there'd be at least another round of the slugfest. Neither he nor Arnie could actually watch the fight from the platform above the cage, but Arnie insisted it was better to watch the crowd of men in the graying dusk. The unfortunate Lieutenant, another Weorsaske, apparently a cousin, handed out the rum ration, and the men below broke into little groups to discuss and drink before the fight resumed. For all the military pomp, this was more of a crowd than a mob, he could see that. The thirty minute nautical light warning bell was clanging, hard metal bells all over the fort, and the poor sentries on night shift were checking the torches and lights all along the great dark walls that loomed in the distant half-light. He could hear the fighters below gearing up to resume, pumping themselves up as the base cook brought over big wooden bowls of steaming food, taking a safer wooden staircase up the tower.

The plate set in front of him was full to the brim with a thick hot stew. Arnie gestured at it- "Local buffalo- they're overrunning the southbank these days. Meant to work with the burnings to clear out the bogs and woods for us, make the inhospitable ground into a garden. Pipedreams of course, but they're savory pipedreams." Arnie downed the glass of brandy and gestured for another. "How have you been? Was the train out here fine? What was the... *whatever* you wanted to discuss? You said you had something for me" The rapid onslaught of questions made him feel unsteady, so he drained his own glass, and then poured out more. It was rich and fiery as it flew down his gullet, and too filling in the early fall heat for the thick meat soup with big hunks of purple muscle to be appealing. "Eh, you know..." he said. How was he ever doing in this god-damned land, surrounded by sycophants and sinners of the worst variety? "The train was fine though. Ran at a reasonable rate. The new freight lines seem to get the job done." He didn't mention the man, or men, in the felt hat, and tried to brighten his face, wash hollowness out of his sunken eyes, make some sort of jest. "I'll show you what I have later, when we get somewhere a little more private. You know." Arnie nodded, and then to cut the tension which was mounting around the brandy and the heady night, "you show me yours, and I'll show you mine." Arnie did not laugh. Like the crown of numbers on a watch face, the planets were out, Jupiter already high in the sky, gleaming bright like a fine diamond. Just above the western wall of the fort, Mars flashed hints of ruby light in the moonless purple of the horizon.

Below them the agitated shouts of the men turned to cheers. Jonas, whoever, went down hard and the crowd went wild. Arnie bit his lip. "And how are you, Weorsaske? The fort not bringing you down too much?" "It's fine. Easy. No fucking rebs looking to bushwhack you, only the odd escaped slave with a pistol or swamp savage. Easy work for the picket boats. It's almost like it isn't work, driving up and down the rivers, some beer, some ice... if you've got the time, I'll take you out." The other Weorsaske, the Lieutenant, brought up the winner. Torchlight danced over his skin, shimmering gold and crimson on beads of sweat and blood. Above the powerful muscles of the man's head and neck, his young face hung, a swollen lip and an eye bruised and already blackening. Arnie feted him briefly before the men, and Jo offered a glass of brandy. He and Arnie were staring at their fifth glass of the brandy, sparkling like an amber necklace with the light of the torches on the watchtower. "This is good stuff, Jo, where did you find it? Is this the typical city egghead's private French booze stash heh?" They both chuckled. "If you brought anymore, I'd like a bottle to take to my Magda. She's..." he trailed off. Jo knew what was expected. "Yes, tell me about this Magda. What pretty creature do you have wrapped around your gold braid now, mister Commodore?" Trying to lilt his voice enough for the desired effect,

and no more. His face felt a little numb from the booze already. It was going fast. He poured more brandy into his mouth and swished it around. He stood himself up to try and stretch his legs, and everything felt a little swirly. Arnie sipped at his glass, like reluctant schoolboy. "Or do you really have *feelings* for her, eh?" He knew now what was up, and he'd have to coax Arnie for details. "It's good to be out here. I've had a real stick up my ass around this promotion. Around life generally. It's good to be moving again." Arnie was staring at his glass. Inside the square bottle, the brown liquor sloshed around the bottom third, and a sense of academy days *deja vu* trickled over the back of his skull, running into his scratch tired eyes....

His eyes blinked open. The sun peered over the prow of the river boat, where he and Weorsaske stretched out, resting his head on the briefcase and tilting the cap so that it covered his eyes, they rested. Under the protective gaze of the marine in the gun tower, the whole town could be glimpsed, fading into the background which filled in the docks and rail-bridge with reeds and weeping willow trees. The other forts, squat without the command tower, were well out of sight when they started talking. Out here, there was little chance of an interlocutor overhearing anything- although he fancied that a man in a black suit and a black round hat was trying to follow at a distance along the far shore. These days, almost nowhere was safe from the ears of the Political Machines or some tight-ass Security Staff man, but a navy boat was a little floating island of privacy, guaranteed by Arnie's own command. Still, Jo noticed that Arnie kept his eyes peeled, and spoke in quiet tones, merging with the rush of water under the boat. Two paranoids in a pear-tree, feathers falling out. Well, that was unfair to himself- despite the appellation egghead, only Arnie was balding. Reeds and rocks lined the banks as the little boat drifted towards the marshland area. "It's mostly safe here. More ghosts than actual reds left these days" and added a gesture to dismiss the man from the gun tower. They were left alone with their cold lager on the deck in the sunlight.

Even to Arnie he felt uncomfortable mentioning the idea of the tail, feeling an icy grip in his nauseous stomach that no beer could warm at the thought of being labeled T4- unfit. There was no going back from something like that, and the fear of that hand stretching out from the Capital, plucking him, fingers starched and bound in black silk... he loved Arnie, like a brother, but... it was fear that slid across his sun-warmed skin like a slick of ice. One message of concern might be enough to get those gears turning. "So, the Big City? Out on the edge of civilization... lots of the 'indigenes' there I hear, merchants and drovers who couldn't get a berth back here" Weorsaske said, sliding a bottle of beer into his gullet, and cracking open another. "Lindemann... you remember Lindemann?" and Jo did, a sort of distant protege, very masculine, always working out, there was something else... "Yeah, Lindemann, right. You trained him right?" He remembered Lindemann now. Gregor. He would have to message him, but they had had moments... more than moments. "That's the one. Moved out there where the meat's a little redder... Anyway," Arnie paused to lick the beads of froth and sweat from the cold beer bottle, "he's in the service. Reliable if you can get to him." "Hmm." Jo demurred. "I'll keep that in mind." He was trying not to think too much about what he was actually trying to do. "Speaking of the Big City," and now Jo glanced around furtively, "my old friend, I've brought you something."

Underneath its polished brown leather and bright brass clasps, his briefcase contained a package wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. He gently undid it, slipped out a black square bulk and handed it to Arnie. "You recognize this?" Arnie

lifted one of his bushy gray eyebrows. "What? This old thing? My gramps told me they'd huddle around this back during the war... that's what this is right?" "More or less." Jo paused. "I can't keep doing this shit Arnie." Arnie looked into his eyes, a strange and intimate pause. They knew each other then. "Sorting through the old files and paybooks from the stuff with drovers." He swallowed, his dry throat catching itself. "We were doing riverboat training out East. Right after the Civil... well you remember." Arnie nodded. "Ah sure." Jo paused again. "We were supposed to be hunting some real Comanche types, you know, horse thieves, bandits, real Mongol hunks." Arnie nodded thoughtfully. "Right, right, making the rivers unsafe. I remember. Then there was that nasty business with the illegal squatters, right, trying to farm that fuckin' desert. Bad times." Jo felt a tear in his soul rising to his eyes, welling pain in tears. He pushed it down. Hard times, hard times. "You remember how they had us give out some stuff, pig lard or whatever, to try and calm everyone down?" "What's the point here?" Weorsaske demanded. "You just need a woman. Magda, you know, she lost her husband to the frontier. Lots of women like that in these parts, maybe you might find one for yourself. It'd do you good- she's made me feel like a real part of society. A real ground outside of this shit" and he gestured back at the fort." Jo faked a laugh, hoping it was convincing.

Jo knew what they had done, things that would follow him until death and beyond. No patchy clown suit or warm bed at night would be free of them. Didn't they haunt Arnie? Tension coiled within him, mortal agony at the immortal stain. He couldn't speak it. Not even to Arnie. "I don't know. I just feel old, and tired. Tired of the border wars and slave fights. Tired of trains and shitty time-tables, always moving forward erratically like a broken watch. Tired of my memories too" he added, dripping with pain and bitterness. He crushed his emotions, like a bootheel landing on the head of a snake. "Just wanted to catch up with everyone from back in the day, back when we thought we could make a difference in this country. Hand these out so we can stay in touch." So I can get you to jump when I do, he thought. But if the man had a woman, had a life outside this... "Pass me another beer, Weorsaske," he said. They clinked the dark brown glass, and together downed the bitter drink.

2: The Man in the Yew



He dreamed that the tower shuddered with every impact. From the fog which had rolled in along the river, great golden arcs shot out, shaking the whole world with every hit. The arrows smashed the window above his crouched body, spraying glass across the room. As he peered through the broken frame, he heard a long undulating call and at the edge of the mist; a rider draped in furs and silks on a sable pony giving a long mournful call as he strung his bow with a strange arrow, a straight line of steel ornamented with stiff triangular red feathers...

Through dark metal corridors, as long as the guts of the whale that swallowed Jonah, he ran. The tower above burned and crumbled. In the hallways men grabbed rifles and hid behind crates. The gallop of unshod horses pounded the dirt above him, mixing with the sound of calls from horns. From the corner of his eye, just beyond his heaving left breast, he could see a white stag keeping pace with him, sliding around corners, ducking the arrows and jets of flame that the hordes shot after them. If he could reach the surface, if he could climb the smoldering tower, if he could inhale the free air of the sky he might still fly away from the ruin. He felt with each pained gasp of stale subterranean air that it was finally over. He knew he would fall and collapse, and he yearned for the succor of a killing blow to end his torment once and for all. But with each turn he remained just out of reach of the grasping leather gauntlets, the hard tan hands reaching for his scalp and missing by hairs.

He knew, then, that he had reached it. No dive into the blue, no soaring on the updrafts away from the flames waited for him. He dropped his shield, tossed his medicine kit behind him, even throwing his precious briefcase to the wind, anything in search of speed, in search of lightness, but already the great vacuuming gusts were pulling him, pulling his pursuers, their steeds, their arrows towards it. Some huge black maw yearned, calling all its children home, hidden there under the yellow sands of the area. Waves of charnel, him, the riders, viscera of a hundred nations sucked down into the deep gullet. And there- the rail, splashed with guts and shards of torn muscle, was broken. Horses were already loud beside him, there was no time to think only time to act, don't think, act, the hot muscles in his leg clenched and unfolded pushing and pulling and leaping forward, the willed impulse shooting down every nerve, overriding the pain of the cramp which shot back and- then the bound; and then the leap-

There was a gentle thump followed by someone's soft swearing, and then the wood-panel door was flung open. A flustered looking man, strung up to a food cart by his belt cart stared in shock for a moment. "Fuck" was the first word that came from the man's mouth, and was followed in the same matter-of-fact tone with a brief apology and an excuse about how stalled trains were different than moving trains. "I'm very sorry for the inconvenience, Sir," the trolley man said as he was getting to the act of leaving the compartment free of any embarrassment or inconvenience, when a devilish thought struck him. "Look here my man, can't you see epaulettes? Do you see the thick gold bar here? Look a little closer there... yes. That's right you've interrupted a Commodore sent out from the capital." At this the trolleyman began to express discomfort, and his eyes began to shift. "Now, to me this looks like it could be some spy trying to sneak into matters of high office, government security, you understand, and that poses quite a threat to me. So, what kind of gestures of good faith can you offer to assuage my doubts? Eh?" dropping his gaze to the cart's liquor cabinet and shifting his arms which had been lolling adrift to innocuously aim open palms at the bottles within. The trolley-man's dark gaze from under heavy brows clicked with some animal comprehension. "Ah, of course of course Mr. Commodore, Sir, no offense intended, none at all. Perhaps I can offer Sir some of the finest farm liquors, bought from the neighboring estates only yesterday, compliments of the train-line?" Having

got the unfortunate serving man where he wanted him, Jo decided that two bottles would be satisfactory as a gesture of faith, compliments to the train crew for their professionalism, no offense taken at all and so on, whereupon the unfortunate man handed over the bottles and scuttled off as quickly as possible.

He poured out a few fingers of the clear, strong smelling stuff from the corked glass bottle, sniffed it suspiciously, wet the tip of his tongue with it. There were two basic mysteries here. Firstly, the train was stopped. Why? Secondly, who was selling this godawful hick drink to the passenger liner in the middle of this godforsaken country? He downed the glass, and winced. The moonshine tasted as bad as it smelled. He poured a couple more fingers out. At least it was free. He reached for his briefcase. He wanted to spend some time with the Navy maps, all the charts of data from the census about farms and taxes and all the reports from the territory. Maybe there was something, demographic, geographic, political, that could explain the two coincided mysteries. It was silly, alright, but this was his vacation, he was on a stalled train, and reading about the people here and trying to map them over the mythic pioneers who had conquered this wild untamed land- well, it was always a voyage in and of itself.

He hoped it was only two nights later, a young moon waxing slowly above towards another fall harvest, and tins of brown pie and empty bottles of farm whiskey rolling on the floor of the stalled train cabin. The urge to do something besides drink over his damned maps had been growing for the period of confinement. Before leaving, he followed the archaic regulations religiously, leaving his blue uniform jacket inside, covering his coat lapels and epaulettes, and left his badges off. Rank didn't need to draw attention to itself during unexpected delays in this country, even if it was mostly pacified. His head felt naked with its mound of thick dark hair left bare. He hadn't planned on more than a single night on this train, but indulgently he had purchased a fancy solo compartment with a bed, very fortunately in hindsight given this endless delay. Not many sodbusters or immigrants looking for a farm traveled at this date, but many people were still traveling to family farms to help with harvests, soldiers traveling to new posts, and the occasional thin dark man hovering just on the corner of his vision... Better for his sore back to have a full mattress length than to be like these people draped over the cushioned seats. He'd had enough hours curling and uncurling and slouching to the floor in cramped positions for a lifetime by the time he was thirty. He could have a bed now, and damn the people in the chairs, he would.

Still, as he reached the last carriage, head dully aching, maybe he hadn't had enough hair of the dog, he thought how restoring it was just to see people. People in low voices discussing, lovers locking eyes, old women nervously watching grandchildren, young men, pulling coats over their heads and feigning indifference to the world around them, a rainbow of life lit by the train lamps and the purple dark stretching across the eternal plains. Checking the gleaming gold pocketwatch under the crackling yellow lamplight at the back of the carriage, he saw it was not even nine. Down the tracks stretching out to the West, a hangnail of gold-dusted moon was sinking, and in its delicate glow he could see outlined copses of yew and ash dotted along the track, and then fifty odd feet over along the freight lines. They were still, after all these years of settlement, trying to turn the desolate plain into a home-like forested garden. A yearning for a cigarette struck him, but he only had an empty pipe in his cabin, so he drummed his hands against the cool wrought iron rail of the platform. Across the fresh air of the autumn night some high hollers sounded, and a

clench in his stomach- wolves, somewhere far in the distance between the groves that signified farm-houses.

Sudden movement on the tracks, between the train and the moon pulling at his eyes down the beams of shimmering steel towards the dark spruce and oak stands which shaded the moon. A flash of shadow over them revealed themselves in an old man out on the rail, gray and tired with a thin unlit cigar hanging from his mouth, crowned and shaded by a sunbeaten piece of slouching leather polished by the setting moon. In the craigs of plains-hardened skin and darkest shadow, a single eye stared out, almost yellow in the dark, but it blinked and became a glowing flinty-blue. The man was covered with a long woolen poncho, hints of dazzling geometries in white and black now a nearly uniform gray. At his crouching feet was a patch of flowers which had forced themselves up between the stones and the rails to unveil their delicate colors in the dapple of light and shadow of the track ballast's rugged geography.

Wordlessly, Jo reached through the railing and flicked his lighter open for the man, who dipped the stick of leaves into the flame and pulled out an ember. Harsh tobacco smoke from a wild variety floated into his nostrils, tingling there. Rings of smoke were already circling the old man although there seemed to be no breath. With a gesture full of surprising fury barely contained in the old muscles the one-eye knelt and ripped a full plant from blossom to bulb out of the rail bed of quartz rocks. Shadow covered the whole of the man's face, leaving only the glowing orange cigar point which floated in the night. A raspy and high voice scrapped out of the dark figure; "A false saffron. You'd do well to stay away from it. Does nasty things to a man's insides" and he tapped the dirt covered bulb. A last ray of moon danced over the old face, catching scars like tears which trickled down from where his eye should have been. For a half-second there was a yellow-fanged grin, and Jo got the impression he was a veteran of this land, although he seemed the wrong age to have been in the thick of any fighting around here.

He tossed the bulb and the flower towards a little clump of yew and ash saplings that Jo hadn't noticed before in the shadow. The old fellow knelt again, this time ripping a clump of the bulbs up. These seemed unnaturally larger than before, and against the starlit night the purple of the petal tips which bled into their pearly white bases was barely visible. "You can call it a crocus to amuse some young thing" the man said, gesturing towards the train- or maybe beyond it- and handed the bouquet to Jo, adding "but save the bulb- you never know when you might need it" with a malicious wink. This was too much for Jo, too witchy, bordering on the pagan, and he intended to ask the man his business. Directing his gaze downward for a brief second to check his holster still hung heavy, he caught a flash of dark against midnight, and turned back to find nothing but rustling grasses and flitting shadows. Harsh odors of tobacco fading, he tucked the plant into his coat, and turned back to the train.

Sidling up to the dining car's cafe-bar, he mulled over the encounter. Judging from the stranger's slight accent, he'd been a homesteader, probably a Dane or something. Nothing strange about that *per se*. All kinds of people wandered their ways out into this wild looking for fresh land to farm. Still, the man had seemed like a grim veteran, knowledgeable about local plants, not a soft city dweller or newly arrived farmer looking for somewhere to ripen his wheat. And what had he been doing hanging around a stalled train? He voiced this last question to the steward behind the counter who was busy preparing coffee. "Well, Sir," meaning his lack of insignia meant

little among the staff, "I reckon it's just one of the farmers, maybe an Olsen." As he cleaned old grounds out of the coffee machine, he explained that when a train stalled out, especially "at this time of year" farmers from nearby would sell their harvest at super-premiums to the stranded lines. "And, can the bigwigs back in the offices afford to risk their permits, and their customers, by stiffing them for food? It's out-and-out extortion, if you ask me." "And nothing less than the rail companies deserve given the rates they charge," another passenger at a table chimed in. He noted that one of the other diners was a thin dark figure, scarred cheeks, black gloves on even in the mild weather who seemed fixated on a little notebook. Jo remained silent, not knowing where things stood, and sat thinking about this over the coffee.

Pounding iron on iron rang like a clock, every two hours. Freight cars full of cattle in one direction, and fertilizers in another, moving ceaselessly, unmolested by whatever force delayed his train. There was some reason they were stopped, surely. The surety of the freight was a comfort. Somehow it let him sleep better in the intervals than he would have if it had been uncertain.

A change in this scheduled certainty woke him, early, dawn light only just beginning to glow on the Eastern horizon, turning it a robin's egg blue which felt too delicate for the early autumn. Outside, the clatter of horses sounded along the rail track. By his watch it was 6:50 in the morning. He rubbed the ridges of stubble forming on his cheeks, and hoisted himself halfway up, peering through the foggy window-glass out across the plain. Thirty head of horses and their riders, dressed in blue denims and caramel leathers, circled towards the engine at a half-canter pace. Though the riders were quiet and focused on their horses, the clatter of the hooves against the quartz railway-ballast rang out across the dewey landscape. Jo reached for the holster slung across the foot of his bed, and checked that the magazine was full of brassy shells.

Stumbling out into the hallway in a dirty undershirt, clutching his pistol still half-wrapped in its leather holster he almost tripped over the scarred black-shirted man who had been taking notes the night before. Neatly dressed in the same pressed black cloth as he had been then, he cut an unflappable figure compared to Jo's panic-bedraggled appearance, but then he couldn't have known about the riders, circling around, glints of metal among their group... Jo motioned a finger over his lips, gestured towards the far side of the train, but all the windows were obscured by compartments. The man in black shrugged, turned, and strode confidently towards the dining car heedless of the warning. Jo lunged towards the man, grabbing at his elbow, but he was met with a smack from a gloved hand. He sat back stunned, expecting to hear the shatter of a window pane and the report of a gunshot from the next car at any second, but silence reigned over the early morning.

He twisted his body around the dark varnish of the panel, gingerly eyeing the external world across his hastily abandoned compartment. It was silent, and still, aside from ripples of wind that pulsed waves through the amber fields of grasses. Was it rye, or barley? It wasn't corn, or wheat, but that didn't mean someone wasn't farming here. He thought again about the Intel charts he had been staring at, but the memory... something about farmer debt, or taxes, something that hadn't added up... the memory was obscured behind a glaze of liquor soaked glasses. Continued silence from the dining car, the absence of any disruption or change, convinced him that he had been dreaming. Perhaps, maybe something out of the fog of sleep. Maybe the shifting of rock below the tracks had sounded like the clatter of hooves. He pulled

himself back into his compartment, closed the panel door, and dressed himself appropriately again. All the same, he double checked that his pistol sat heavy with brass in his holster, and he pulled his boots extra tight.

Jo decided to take the black cup of coffee, alone on its deathly white porcelain plate, to the back platform of the train. The slight chill of the early autumn was fading into the honey glow of a morning sun as he started puffing away at something that smelled like a little cigar. The buzz of his breakfast went to his stomach, and hit hard, but it also evened out the feverish chill of his nerves. Although shaded by the train, the effervescent steam from his coffee still traced beautiful swirls in the crisp air. A pair of young couples spilled out of the doorway onto the wrought iron platform, barely glancing at him as they gathered against the rails. His hackles raised at the flashes of a gray uniform, but he calmed himself- all the fighting to be done over that color was long past for him. Leave it to younger men to brawl over such things.

Although the newly arrived party all shared one face, decorated lovestruck blue eyes and cruelly perfect chins, they held themselves in distinction. One of the women was dressed in the height of fashion, a green silk dress, polished leather boots with shapely arched heels, pearly curls of white ruffle fabric leaping like sea-foam from a cresting green wave at her neck and ankles. Her man had a close cropped layer of fine hairs under a gray kepi cap- a junior officers uniform, recycled for fashion or cheapness by the army, shading his peach-smooth skin which fit tightly against high and firm cheekbones. His back was tall and powerful, especially compared to the slumping shorter figure, a decade older, whose flesh hung from his face like saddle bags or sacks of grain. They had the same bones underneath, it seemed, but the older and shorter man had thick golden curls halfway down his face. A straw mop of dirty hay covered his head. How the service used up the youth, he thought. That was a man who had seen the frontier, maybe with the cavalry. His spouse, older and thin, even thinner in comparison to straw-mop's stumpy appearance, reminded him somehow of a heron, gracefully composed, and ready to kill with a glance of cruel gray-blue eyes. He nodded to the man, younger than he was despite his sagging figure, and touched his cap to the kid. They nodded back, and resumed a low chatter, gazing down the rails, perhaps reminiscing on the old civilized world they had just left.

The couples were engrossed in themselves, and for a second he felt a sense of shame, but in the end, he was an officer- and more importantly on a mission of his own- and so he did interrupt. He coughed, loudly, over his little cigar, and then drained his coffee before turning to them. Fair warning Jo figured. Then he launched his direct question. "Have you all seen any riders? Horsemen riding around the train?" All faces turned towards him, flashes of annoyance at this breach of etiquette. Fuck them, Jo knew he was within his rights. After a pause, Straw-hat tried to plug up breaches in etiquette, extending his hand and introducing himself as Peter, the gray eminence as his wife, unnamed, his brother Frank and his fiancée. Then, a pause, as if to queue a response from Jo. With a casual salute, Jo rattled off, "Commodore Josia Wenschler, Naval Intelligence" in the sternest voice he could, and then pulled out a pad for notes. "I could ask for all your full names, Peter, and keep them to check up on, but I'd prefer to keep this informal" with sharpness, and then more gently, "so, have you seen any strange riders about? Any family in the area or anything?"

Scaring the hell out of hick farmers was always fun. Sure, many of them had put in three years, drinking in forts and pretending to keep the frontier sealed, before skeddadling off to a nice plot of land, fertilized with blood from the Red wars and the

turf wars, and bushwacking, and feuding, and the civil thing- but hell, he had seen too many corpses, too many wasting slaves to really give a fuck about them. He let them try and carve a little slice of life out of the bloody land, so let him remind them that it was wolves with guns like him who let them. They always folded quickly after that too, who knew what uniformed dicks could get away with, and besides he was authoritative enough. They were all staked out in the rear passenger carriage, but the dumpy blond had noticed torches moving along the train in the night. Came to realize, he might have known a man who had settled down on a plot around a different train line, not this one noooo, much further to the south. Sure. But the realization was, maybe stalled trains like this were big ways to sell produce from the farms, much closer than shipping it to one of the industrial freight hubs, so maybe if a train got stuck- well, easier than trucking it a hundred miles to some loading station.

Jo mulled this over, alone, on the platform, his little cigar shrinking down to a tiny nub of gray and black. After thinking everything over, once, twice, hell who knew how many times, he re-entered the darkness of the carriage. It smelled, after almost a week, smelled like food and sweat and farts, like people who didn't shower enough. A society had started to bud in the long waiting process, people taking walks along the tracks, making acquaintances, fucking in the bathrooms. They all looked the same to him, and he tried to ignore them entirely, their smell, their presence, the meaning of their being here, on these two spindly tracks of steel, in the middle of this wasteland of corn and steppe prairie dotted with dying groves. It meant nothing to him. Maybe it wasn't even real. Suddenly his face was slamming into the polished oak flooring, the smell of resin and shoe-soles cramming into his nose. He pushed himself up, awkwardly, already feeling out of shape, and rose to see Peter Frohmann, the straw-mop of a fat fucking farmer pretending to snore with one stumpy leg stuck into the isle. On impulse his hand almost dropped to his belt, but- for dramatic flair- he grabbed his wrist with his left to restrain himself. Soured over the apparition of incontrovertible reality, he goose-stepped, loudly, back to his cabin, slammed the door, and searched up some long list, pages and pages of figures, about the local farming products.

Night again. Jo groaned and rolled over, fumbling for the watch from his pocket, the once-neat pressed blue of his uniform dissolving into ripples and craigs. By phosphorescent tinted tines he could guess that it was four in the morning. A new bottle rolled, almost empty, across the bed sheets. He picked it up, drained it, and was about to nod back to sleep when a flash caught his eye. Like a comet low on the horizon at first, a torch-light flickered solitary in the distance. A flash, and another joined it, and then more. A sense of panic, the unknown in this savage place struck him. Somewhere in the whiskey wet recess of his mind a flicker of neurons burst, recognition. No way to ship and sell extra produce out here in this savage landscape. Too far to transport fragile eggs, spoiling fruits, anything but salted meat, grain, and liquor to the mega-stations of the freight lines. They had to sell the excess to meet taxes. How else could they have done it?

When slave power had tried to secure itself, provoking the little civil thing, brigades and conscript drafts had learned to break up the rail lines, twist tracks around trees, move them, block a train from getting through. It would make too much sense that they'd keep those memories and skills, that they'd use them before letting their families collapse under the tax burden it took to keep the endless bloody frontier closed to the ever-resistant Red beasts. It was probably too easy to get a group

together and sell goods while the train was disrupted. Who could complain there, let alone finger a good honest man for something that a lone bandit or marauding savage had done? The torches were getting closer. Of course, what stopped you from simply bushwacking a train, killing everyone and taking all the money? Sure, it might bring down some heat, but... but, well, why sell so much booze and food to the train first? Maybe it would calm people down before the strike, but it seemed wasteful. He reached for his little cigars, then remembered he was inside a train, and the hassle getting kicked off here would involve. He put his hand down, rolled off his jacket and tight boots, and then stretched himself back into the bed. No need to worry about paranoid fantasies when paranoid realities watched him just down the corridor. Either they'd get him, or they wouldn't, and no worrying would help here.

He woke up late in the morning, head pounding, and blurred memories of fire on the horizon jolting him upright. Finding the compartment as messy a heap as ever, he felt calm. A little black coffee later, the call of nature drove him to take a walk down the rails towards a grove of yew. Fresh air did him good, clearing out the poisons of the night before, giving him space to question dream-like glimpses of memory into the whiskey gauze coating of recent days. He was beginning to doubt the existence of any riders at all, when he stumbled across strange markings in the soft autumn dirt of a yew copse. U shaped horse tracks confirmed that the torches weren't a delusion. Also there was the jewelweed. Even in the forests of youth with the wandering birds, orange-flowered snappods had left their mark. They weren't everywhere of course, but on the edges of the yew groves, their flaming beauty was spent peeking out through the fall, until "popopop" their ripe pods would push out, sending seeds zooming off. Fun games for children, but as anyone who had ever hunted, or spent much time in the ranging forces, knew they were sure ways of tracking. The springs dried out rapidly after shooting out, so you could use the ripples of spent pods as evidence of movement, like a body-littered battlefield after some fight. His dawn wander at the track edges revealed snapped paths of jewelweed among the straight rows of trees. Signs of incursions in swathes that crept ever closer to the carriages.

He slipped into the gentle stroll, meandering with so late a start as to find the evening chill of fall descending. As the sun started to set- days were already feeling shorter, Jo'd spent less than half the day bathing in warmth and gathering medicinal sunshine, more than half the day spent shielded in the stalled iron horse. Lonely carriages in red enamel and black wrought iron stood isolated on the vastness of the plain. Cold metal skin and weak glass stretched thin on the scar of a train track, silent except the occasional gust of wind or roar of passing freight. It felt fragile enough that even a single bullet might rip through, bleeding the half-wild expanse into the iron crate of civilized life. Once upon a time, train windows had been much thicker, part of an armor fit more for some medieval steed than this engine of progress. As the country settled into the new civilization, found a new culture and a new kind of possession, the cost in coal and time had meant the thick slits of glass were replaced with great flat planes, screens through which passed the haunting panorama of the land to the flowing rivers of passengers. Like the change from the old Latin temples of thick stone walls to the shapely gothic arches where light flowed in, new illuminations heralded a change in the hearts of the men facing them. Life inside the carriages was feeling the staleness of the wait. It was hard to see how they could stand to wait for the repair teams to reach them from the stations. Already the people seemed more distant and withdrawn, alternating bouts of boisterous over-exposure with fearful seclusion. He couldn't imagine the rail would stay closed into the November rains or December

drafts, but he didn't imagine that it could have taken a week to do anything either. Perhaps in days long gone, a swashbuckling commodore might have organized pioneer teams of young men on the train to guard the perimeter, search the forests, and protect the fort. Today? It was just policy to maintain a low profile, he told himself, it *was* important. A deeper fear lurked in the depths of his soul, blocking him from organizing anything besides a glass of a muddy apple liquor. Jo sat staring at it in silence as the stars came out and little lights flickered to life behind the windows of the train.

Early one next morning he got up the same as usual. Brig-like comfort from the contained compartment eased his sleep well past dawn, no clatter of hooves to interrupt the constant cycle of freight cars on the further track. Each fresh moment of waking struck in him the same notion- it was all fantastic. Silent men in black with notepads, inexhaustible supplies of liquor, bands of horsemen like from the past, delays where no one else, passenger or steward, noticed, the strange gray man outside who had never rematerialized. Worse, his mind felt like it was slipping, that he hadn't kept it sharp amidst the clatter of the big industrial cattle cars and the slosh of hard drink. All the forms of endless prairies and patches of aging yew, each new day of waiting, isolation in his compartment, staring at numbers and pages of charts, hoping for some mystical breakthrough to a truthful revelation. No inner knowledge had appeared to wipe away wasted time. The train delay hadn't killed his schedule entirely- he would cut his vacationing at a couple spots short as he made his way to the posting. Still, someone, somewhere was bleeding time from him, days from his life. Enough looking at maps. The late starts were like barnacles on a hull, encroaching fouling him, making each day later and slower than the last, each day a faster descent into the comfort of a bottle.

A spurt of rage erupted suddenly, and he snatched up the only full bottle, unstoppered it, and started to pour the contents out of the train window. A gust of cool air from the pre-dawn plain hit his face, and a shock of recognizable *deja vu* came to his senses. He had seen his old man do this same impotent gesture before, pulling his head out of a drunken gutter on some brief visit home, only to plunge back in when he returned to that love of his life, frontier duty. Back on the plain, half erect out the side of the lonesome train he gazed at a shattered glass pile scattering into the little crevasses and dimples of the railroad ballast. No city service around here to get rid of the waste, to take the glass memories of shame away. He wished the train would jolt forward, pull him away from this spot. Hadn't the farmers bled enough time and money, more than their reasonable share? Surely the big passenger lines had to at least pretend to meet the time schedules. Yesterday had he also claimed he was putting aside the bottle to think through this? He couldn't really remember the date they had embarked, and although he could probably find a copy of a ticket stub... anything might be fabricated now. He had no handwritten journal, no memorable landmark in time, just a patchy recollection- god, was this the break that would- no. Still, still, still. The wine was gone. Drinking was becoming a liability, even for a carefree vacation. It had been a mistake to think anything could be carefree these days, especially with his project, hurtling eternally onward to the edge of the socialized world. If he had to give it up again he would. He had done this before. He could do it again. He needed to. The Cause needed it, God, he, demanded it. He tossed the bottles over the windowsill. "Not littering" he said to himself, "the glass comes from the rocks. In boats it's tossed over to help make the sea glass, the amber jewels in blues and greens and browns and purples that children love to search the sands for. We are just

as much a cycle as the rocks or the dirt” Who would step on it here? Only a careless greedy farmer type. That strange man, fading in and out of a mist of memory, in and out of the shadow of the yew copses, behind the train- a man like that would look where he stepped. He forgot the misdemeanor and turned to straightening out the cabin, crimping sheets, clearing out tabs of files.

Sorting the files in his brief for the hundredth time, barely able to remember why or what he had looked at them before, took most of the day. Detailed topographic maps fresh from the surveys, with gardens of colors scattering across them showing old local tribes, political boundaries, settlements, pioneer paths, rails; in red and blue, the arteries and veins that carried the blood of a nation which pumped them further afield with every breath. Now, even the furthest edges had too much color, too many details. It was easier these days with the new ways of carrying information and people, for them to spread out- much faster than the first wave of horse drawn cannons and grim men relying on the “natural bounty” of whoever had been farming or hunting or herding when they arrived. Hard to believe that it had been done, stolen survey maps, state secrets, crumbling paper and rain smeared ink, a truly Herculean task to break the wild country in those days. That couldn’t stop the waves of people settling down the land like sunbeams traveling across desolate space, bringing Their Civilization to foreign wastes, farms and plows and healthy cattle, making sure every child had a full plate and a good education. Well, ever “proper child”. Even today, who would bother teaching letters to a beef bull, or a slave? Only the most fundamental bible thumpers or ambitious lovers of efficiency hoping to find unpaid secretaries. Dizzying, he thought as he shuffled and swiped through the waves of information each map contained. The files sorted themselves into their places slowly, building a narrative in their folders as much as in his neurons. Table clear, cabin clean, he set about cleaning his handgun soaking up the grease scent with his nose, making sure each piece was well prepared for anything to come.

Darkness hadn’t fully fallen when a plume of white steam from the front of the train signaled the advance. Repair crews must have finally figured out that they were needed. Impossible to know why, and unhealthy to let speculation sow deeper the seeds of paranoia. After all, they were to be on the move again. Movement in the train jerked him forward, rolling him into the embrace of a mattress, a great tumbling down into the solace of sleep’s solitude. Rushing along the gentle curve of the steel road, the bunk mimicked the sway of the sea, each rattle of steel a wave felt in every swing of the downy mattress.

The sun rays spread from beyond the clear horizon through purple heather flowers, past curves in his closed eyes, becoming waves of salty motion deep in his skull. Amidst wildflowers and grasses, dark red rows burst forth in a field. Some line of corpses, watered with the blood of the few untamed savages left? No, not here, still so far from the new frontier, not in these latter days. Every breathing thing had been bought and sold and butchered and pushed, always further and further, to the edges of the land itself.

Row after row of them, ripe berries like fronds of pink fluff pushed past the deep red leaves. It was early for harvests, but even so he could see the fieldworkers, pushed like chattel, snapping the heads of amethyst bushes of grain close to the large field houses. He chuckled and shook his head. “Amaranth.” The things even these big plantations grew today. Easier to dry and ship than a fresh apple tart, for sure. He chuckled, imagining the homeowner trying to organize the hands into a sabotage

team, trying to sell off red grain and offering bribes of the health food to rail stewards, as if it was something fit to serve on a rail car. These days though, even big plots, owned by men with big names, might find trouble selling on contract to the cities if they didn't own some stake in the freight lines. This land was changing yet again, and who knew if there'd be more hell to pay than a week delay on a train- it had happened before.

With a steaming cup of espresso for company (there was a rabbit hole to explore) he checked the ticket copies and the listed itineraries for trains headed out towards great mountain foothills. There was a train every couple of weeks, maybe exactly every thirteen days to be precise, but with delays like this, who really knew. With luck on his side, there'd be one departing tonight. In that case, the reluctantly approaching stop would offer just a few hours. God willing it would be time enough to drop off the packages to the people there, and then slip onwards away towards his post. If he was lucky, he could even lose his tail in the bustle of a bigger station, choked with freight cars and loading crews. Jo checked that his watch was set, then walked, without tripping, to the rear platform. Pale gold sunshine floated in the morning air, and fresh wind from the wilderness carried the late sweetness of flowers, leaving a slight chill to burn off lingering summer heat across the flat land. Time moved on, one watch tick at a time, one spin of the steel wheels on the track, one solar rotation after another, and with that slow constancy achieved, all would be well. The yew-furnished baroque cabinet which bore him ever on.

3: Utopia, That Priestess



Flashes flickered across the sky as the great sun sharply swung in the sky, like a man on a line. It jerked from a calm center, sloshing across a blue deck to the sky dome's gunwales. In shuddering wake-waves it left towering black spirals, pits of solar afterburn and cold starlight mingling and dancing in strange forms. The sun had spent itself, combusting billions of tons of its own life blood, merging and melting in huge foundries of weight, space and time. Blood had spilled, pouring for generations to nourish the land by honey-gold warmth. It, which had fed hungry plants for eons, vanished in a dreamer's moment, leaving a great absent shadow. Was this what centurions, wine-drunk after that night of idle torture, had seen? Standing in that hot dry land, in midday night, when blood had gushed for the first and last time from the side of a man, enough to blot the sky, had they felt this frost? Around the new wheel of absent dark, looming huge against the sky, the stars became wolves, light tying itself into strange forms, pale and starving, which loped after each other around the pit.

He raised his hands in supplication, hiding his eyes. If this was his moment, let it come, let it devour him, let it clean the world of his sinful life. But the cold wave passed him by untouched. Giant ripples of frost spread out across the land, waves of white flame which scoured the countryside, burned the vines in their posts, hardening berms, biting and gnawing at squash flowers where they blossomed. Then a great wailing followed the frost-flame as it crackled across the land. The shining black wheel, glassy and smooth, curving fangs, time whirling in one constant clock-dance. Frost started to track towards him, icy heat and glistening light below, billowing dark above- how many innocents did it consume? He desired a smiting for his own sake, but for all these others, he had never dreamed...

Jo broke then, whether finding cowardice or courage, perseverance or fear, he never knew. He found himself curled into the lowest space, a cave, where his hands bleed on rocks, scrabbling down down down, as far as he could, contorting into flat shapes, tumbling ball shapes, weird bent squares, hiding, running, descending.

The moon was a coin of golden butter. It sat fat and creamy, only a hair more molten away than the night before. Hints of snow and the promise of frost shivered in the wind, but for the moment the night remained mellow in the afterglow of summer. Abruptly Jo's train to the last great trading Fort had been called back, cause and purpose unknown. The passengers had been dumped unceremoniously along the tracks. In promises a cable had been sent to some nearby hidey-hole of a village off the main line, hoping for a local guide- but then they had also paid for the promise of a straightforward passage on the rails. Still, the weather was gentle, and under light of the harvest moon, night would be no burden. Moonbeams filtered through blushing leaves, creating a canopy of glittering silver and gold from the molten colors of the fall day.

They were a group of five who had elected to try and catch the next free train, preferring the rural countryside of dickering around a crowded city-station for a week. All sat in stony silence waiting for some guide to point them towards this hidden township. Jo was lost in the mesmerizing twinned snakes which shimmered into the dark bend distance, threads of a spider's web. There were only the two here, marking a one way circuit, seldom traveled, avoided by the great freight lines due to a paucity of politically connected farmers and the surplus of bandits whose memory dominated land as the limit of the civilized empire approached. Even in this hollow, expanses of prairie and forest, which stretched towards hills who rolled more and more violently south of the big lake city, little dairies and towns sprouted like thistles across a map.

Men who soldiered were practically given land grants for whatever service, conditioned not by reasoned distribution, but tides of passion and romance which formed patchworks of property stretching back to the first wars and forward to the spine-bones of the mountains. It was they who claimed and tamed the land, building patterned houses, churches, perfect rectangles of wheat fields, and new township every week to boot. This remained a vast expanse, dark ground bloodied by bandits and marauding reds. Despite the sprouting towns, one still felt the half-scarred, unhealed frontier here- an emptiness, an absence.

In the thick trees south, a solitary donkey carrying a lantern and a man appeared. "Eye 'ope youse don't mind a tiddy walk, in this warm air, an eye figured it'd be most healthsome for myself, so eye neglected to offer youse a coach." As he spoke the donkey-rider picked at his nose. The five stood. Jo, first, in his officer's greatcoat, peaked white hat, gold, leather, and black braid- washed out in shades of night. Next a preacher-man in a long black dress, a hint of white at the center of his throat, and a large suitcase in hand. Then, two business men, tall felted hats wrapped in a sheen; one sable, one silken, above matching starched collars and polished spats, stiff and properly emotionless as mannequins. Finally, the last, a pale and thin man, his face just covered with enough gray stubble, his right arm emaciated and unmoving, a hint of improper mystery- perhaps a veteran? Together on their feet, in silence, they followed after the donkey's bobbing light and thick country accent into the woods.

The little settlement was hidden behind a mile of trees and thorn thickets, all rough hewn wood, little candles behind thick glass windows, and affected sod roofs still covered in green grass and the occasional wild flowers. The settlement from out-of-time wilted gently in the moonlight as they strode onto its dusty paths. Wisps of smoke rose up from the chimneys of sturdy little cabins, dancing gray ghosts in the silver beams, eddies of heat in a cooling night. The settlement was like this: houses arrayed like spokes of a wagon wheel, each making a knob at the end of a spindly dirt road. The hub and axis was a large cluster of bigger buildings, centered around chimney-topped furnaces and kilns said: autonomy and industry, hand in hand- what could be more fitting for this ridiculous place?

A little creek ran through the town, splitting the axel and pushing a mill wheel attached to a thick timber building. Across the little riverlet an ornate longhouse stood, dressed in curving wooden shingles and carefully balanced pillars of oak. Longhouses had been more common back in the day- the comfort of the barracks for soldiers settling, protection from massacres and raids, the community ideal. Now, they had fallen from favor everywhere, replaced by beerhouses and brothels for most days, and temples of worship for the pious few. No steeple rose above the common house in this town. From the shadow-rich eaves of the longhouse, under a plume of mercurial wood-smoke, a solitary voice- a woman's voice, crisp, and well educated- sounded out into the night: "Come, weary travelers, forgive our tardy guide! Though the hour is late, we would welcome you yet with meat and mead!"

The inside of the great hall was alien. There was no cookroom- instead, like pews in a chapel, rows of unvarnished wood crossed the hall in great tables, large wall-hearths at the end of each. Strange carvings, pensises and demons spread themselves over the dark-stained wooden posts, dancing in the shadows of a dozen flickering hearth-fires. Two of these great fires were yet bright, merry and orange with cooking coals. Above them large wrought iron kettles hung, bellowing forth steam.

“Roast Squash, fresh from our gardens, one with chicken, one vegetarian, as you will” the matron instructed the men as they set their hats aside and sat on the hewn benches.

Wooden cups, similarly rude, bound with iron, sat brimming with froth- probably the local mead. “We keep bees, as the ancient people of this land did. With our reasonable stewardship, our forest is rich and bountiful” the woman announced with jovial tones as she took a seat at the head of the table. The warm light of the fire illuminating the modest brocade, a shimmering goddess of buxom marble and gold transformed from the homespun linen and sunlined face she wore with powerful beauty. Though the strangely grizzled man never looked up from his bowl, Jo felt himself noticing her; and in the same moment, noticed the businessmen and the preacher noticing her. Did they notice him noticing her, too?

In what must have been minutes of chest-warming slurping of the crude bowls rich with warm orange-yellow stew, the pastor's head was the first to rise. His neck moved stiffly and severely, uncomfortably erect as he turned towards their hostess. “Ma’am,” he began “I must thank you for the hot supper and the guide your village has provided,” and then the man paused, coughing as if to clear his throat from the clerics Geneva robes, “but I must confess that something weighs on my heart” and then he plunged beyond the bounds of politeness and guest-hood into his damning profession “That which I could not avoid noticing is that there is no steeple nor grove here; that you are not on the rail line. In complete, that your settlement is all self-made. Though I have oft heard of religious communities which sup together, and which distance themselves from the soot of cities, I find doubt and concern seeded in my heart when I see such shared life with no guiding faith” and then trailing into a bizarre silence, somehow ripe, he fell silent, looking into the void, gaze halfway between the blonde locks of the domineering woman and the vibrant squash-yellow in his bowl.

Heartbeats of frigid silence passed unheated by the warm fire. Then their hostess moved suddenly, like a grecian goddess sprung to life from within cold marble, turning to gesture and whisper something to one of the townsmen seated at the other table in their row. This turn triggered a wave of motion- in his head, and around his companions. Stomach full and warm with food, feet uncurling from the forest-walk, he noted in their same pew across the keel beams of the roof, that there sat five townsmen. All of them- rough, bearded men, had been frozen in the flickering firelight staring at their newly arrived counterparts. The grizzled fellow, who had eaten the whole bowl of soup rapidly, only ever moving his left arm, turned to gaze coldly at the pastor. A businessman, pressed hair had recently shorn of its sable hat, turned to snap harshly. “Sirrah, we’re all guests here, no need to be making troublesome questions while there’s hot food on your plate.” His partner remained silent, but contemplated the honeyed alcohol with smoldering eyes.

This common response attracted the pastors ire. “I, *sir*,” he spat with righteous fury, “must ask- could God forgive us sin so great as to leave our country men in dark superstition, in drink and violence against their own brothers, without the light of Christ’s Church?” which provoked an flushed eye roll even from Jo, and grunts of discontent from the background. Sable-hat felt drawn in and began to accuse the pastor of some mild sectarian blasphemy, a useless mire of argument. Fortune smiled when the marble face cracked a sedate grin and the artful pink lips bent apart. “My dear guest, I appreciate your concern for the good people of the town- and your concern for sin. I *fervently* assure you that we of Hopetown do not lightly engage in

bitter presumption, instead, preferring to wait for rewards fitting to our own natures.” The preacher’s harsh brows seemed to squirm wrothfully, but the woman continued “It is a doctrine, perhaps, that might intrigue you in contemplation. Perhaps, tomorrow, we will show you where and how we worship, that your hot soul might feel the balmy contentment that we know here?” and those sour, ratty, lips paused in a moment of artful promise.

Once the dinner was finished and all disturbance vanished, veiled by runs of pale gold mead, the guests stood. Occasional spurts of conversation passed between the business partners as they moved outside to an ever colder night. Jo was reaching for a short brown cigar and a match when a rugged man, ruddy and wood-hewn, grabbed his arm. “Eyeh, Frriend, we don’t apprrreciate the weed arrround herre. We alls brrreathe in the same airr, an’ brrreathe i’out too” A fat red sausage of a finger flicked his match’s head. “If yewd note that, I’d apprrreciate it.” Jo sized up the man, and decided that the thrill of nicotine poisoning could wait. The man who had grabbed him did not apologize- perhaps he was ignorant of Jo’s rank- but instead introduced himself.

Rollo was a migrant from Normandy, he said, and enthusiastically offered Jo a bed to stay in, smoke free of course, but no other strings. No tents or nearby forts to barrack in, no polite way to refuse a kind offer, and no reason not to take a hay mattress over the coldness of dew-damp grass. Rollo the Norman led him down one of the spoke-roads, down to a clustered hub of cabins. All were similar, prefab designs, identical lilt of roofs and porches, each painted with a dicolor fringe varied in the shades of a rainbow sprayed chrome by the moon. Rollo claimed one with green and white paint, and directed the tired commodore to a cozy loft inside. Only a single small glass square hung in a swinging wood frame for a window under the wood and turf ceiling, but the bed was an admirable feather mattress with a thick comforter. Just as he was fading into unconsciousness, he found another flaw. Below him, undulating animal calls sounded. There was no door leading to the main room of the cabin to shut out the sounds- no the breaths of that same air they were breathing, hot and sweet from their rutting. At least it’s not loud, he thought, willing himself to to sleep, repressing his inbred disgust.

Morning brought sun peeping through the six little panes of glass, gracing his half-asleep corpse. He could feel himself slipping back away, the hint of nausea and brains pounding against bone with every turn of his head. He rolled uncomfortably out of the cramped warmth of the short mattress, and landed with a thud on the unvarnished wood floor planks. His briefcase was still locked, and his boots were still black. Shedding a sweat-soaked skin of cotton, baring his gooseflesh to the world. Nude, Jo assembled himself for the day, rolling his cotton bedshirt into his case, tightly pulling up socks and underwear and then suiting on blue pants interlaced with a series of shirts designed more for peacocking presentation than comfort.

Down the wood ladder, he clambered, narrowly avoiding splintering raw-wood rungs, finding himself at the bottom, face to face with what could only be the woman he had heard the night before. Blonde locks and sharp sheer cheeks, pale and pink-too pale and too pink for someone who spent days farming, Jo felt, but then what did he know about farming? “Ah, a,” he sputtered, before arriving at “G’morning ma’am. Your, eh- husband Rollo was most kind to offer me the loft for the night, I uhm,” he flinched his cheeks to repress the thought “hope I wasn’t an inconvenience.” As he breathed around the awkward talk, a scent flowed in, fruity and violet. Despite the

severe look of her brows- haughty and fine- his hostess beamed back at him, introduced herself as "Wanda," assured him there was "no trouble," and that if he would accompany her and Rollo (who at this moment was stretching in the bed) to the longhouse, they would have hot water and "well, not coffee exactly, but something close enough. You being from the city must have quite the taste for the coffee, is it not so?" and he could only answer with a short affirmation- even at the hour (8h50 per his pocket watch) his brain was basically non-functional without some morning brew.

Jo stared across the table at Rollo, who grinned at him, the pupils of his eyes big and laughing and black as sin. The drink, boiled water and a local root, was more of a tea than anything you could imagine to be coffee, but it was hot and bitter and it made his brain work better. Over the steam, he found his foot tapping with nervous anticipation. "Does the train fail down here much? For a bit, or are they quick fixing it?" Rollo looked up from half of a boiled egg spread across rich brown bread he was dunking in it, and asked, "Ave y'everrr 'earrrd of Fourrrierrr?" This stopped Jo in his tracks. He found ignoring direct questions extremely rude- unspeakably outside good taste. Like fucking with a guest in the house. Trying not to appear as slackjawed as he felt, he asked again, snapping his fingers "Hey Rollo- has the train dumped people here before? Are we your first guests?" Rollo continued unfazed. "E was some silly Frrrenseman who believed zat people werrre best suited to living in brrricks, like you do in ze cities" and then he gestured over at the pastor, sitting closely sandwiched between two young women who might have been sisters, his arms seeming to move his breakfast egg with vigor. Jo snapped his head away rapidly, scanning for the others- the business men were talking in an animated fashion with the matron from the night before, leaving their respective hosts with empty seats they had left at one of the other company. The lame man was staring at his cup in silence at the far end of the hall. All around, cheery blonde couples spoke in a mishmash of strong and varied accents, laughing in loud and happy voices. Rollo looked at him and said "e sought tat sexual prrrrovision sould be made for all ze young men too, eh? Wad you sink of tat you bigshot? Is tat your 'obby in ze cities?" his face plastered with a grin that would almost be mistaken for pleasant encouragement, if not for its wolfish hunger.

His back tensed, muscles contracting like pistons, gears churned behind his eyes, his neck tilted askew, and his mouth hung ever so slightly agape, like a broken automaton in a carnival. Thought put itself together slowly, the strange situation floating through his spine. Then he snapped back to life, a path ahead of him once again. "Ah, you said French? Like yourself, eyh? Is this some kind of French settlement?" The blow landed. Rollo's eyes narrowed, and he spoke slow and precise. "I'm a Norman. A Norman. Get that through your thick skull." He was leaning over the table. Jo had never met a French man who pretended that what was Norman wasn't French- rather they all seemed intent on Normandy being France. Of course, any real man of good stock would have distanced themselves from the dandies of Europe, with their feathery hats and strange food. Especially out here, where one had to be a man to hold land. "Ah, well you've lost me then" he said. Rollo, his wife grasping his arm with a sun-browed hand, as if to restrain him, interjected "no, no dear. It's very confusing. He was a bit of a socialistic type and," Rollo triumphantly paused "anti-semitic too!" He couldn't give a figs' pith about the French, (not his side of the country) and felt impatiently angry as the topic of the train slipped away and the always dangerous quagmire of politics emerged around him. "Well, did this Furieniture have much to say about train schedules?" Jo asked with a sanguine air. Fortunately, Rollo had had enough excitement, and as stridently as he had strayed, he returned to

that pressing topic. "It happens from time to time. Maybe a week, maybe two, it depends how bad the Army or whoever needs the trains." He tried to find it a satisfactory answer. Would have been if it didn't mean many more days breathing the same air and listening to the bawdy conversation of this town, garnished with nights in that fucking loft. He drained a bitter cup, and asked for a wash basin.

Waning gibbous, he decided. The moon was melting, night by night and inch by inch from that silver dollar, but still pretended to illuminate a black country sky through little window panes. Another clear cold night, dry and mild for the time of the year. The smoke from the distant fires had passed on, draining the sunset of its color, but the stars above still winked above in their nude beauty.

What had Rollo said about sexual provision? Tonight the breathing, the groans and moans, the words, everything below him was more noticeable. Did they get off on his presence? No down blanket blocked out the sounds, though it hid any involuntary reaction. Sexual provision. He rolled over from one sore shoulder and crushed ear onto another, biting his lip in discontent. An eternal problem for the Navy- for any band of men, maybe, but especially on little tiny islands sitting inside the waves for months. Brothels and lax discipline for "misconduct" around foreign ports, officers turning the other way with smut, even onboard black markets underneath the polished veneer of courtly professionalism- and that was without all the other rumors Navy-life invited. Bunking close night after night with your mates? Not so much a problem for the intelligence and the port postings that he had been seeking out. Not so much a problem as he sank ever deeper into his cups and his Capitol bound office's walls year after year. But even so, there were limits. He half wanted to slide down the ladder, give them a piece of what he thought. Or maybe felt. Or... he couldn't bring himself to finish. He needed sleep. His medical provisions sat in the brief, and there was even a little personal indulgence, ice to the nerves for a night like this. He didn't even care about the clatter of the hollow glass, rolling from his hand as he sank deep into the dreamy down.

A blossoming night-flower, dreamy fantasy-gardens full of haunting statues clad in gold fabric, crusted with diamonds, gazing at him, hidden knowledge frozen behind their rocky visages. They danced around him, staggering flashes of jewels, fading in and out of memory. The next day, or maybe the day after- everything sank into that fever-haze, was no different from the ones before here. The slow shift in the wind and the moon were all that marked the change as he slid from dream to sleep and back again. Gone were his brilliant flashes of prescience and living memory. No autumn birdsong flitted through windows into his mind, only a rolling static of rich imagery, disconnected from the outside.

It was some indistinguishable morning, maybe three days, maybe a week later. After a customary and recalcitrant appearance at the loud communal breakfast, Rollo had vanished off to his assigned tasks. The whole town was, despite it's soft appearance, run like a barracks, with assigned lots and task quotas. It seemed barely legal, let alone functional, but the sheep here were fat, the honey came in gallons, cider apples filled their presses, squash and fragrant flowers filled harvest baskets. But peasants farming vegetables could never have bought the iron and the ovens, let alone everything more functionally enlightened, for this place, austere and autarkic as it was. He stood, staring out at flax collectors, when he found himself beside that woman who had welcomed them that night.

For a moment their bodies hung caught in the same gentle gust of fall breeze, the scent of drying leaves and hay ripe on the wind, the heat from the sun mixing with the warm breaths that filled the air between them. She was staring out at a metal cock of a weathervane, which drifted lazily towards the North-East. In a ripe voice, softness covering the provocation of the words: "Early cold winds this year, after so hot a summer. What do you make of that, Mr. Officer? Hard sailing out here?" Her marbled skin lined with jade had just a hint of a smile pulled back in a brocaded veil of her cheeks. He didn't bother facing her, pondering this exchange of breaths from the distant frontier rolling across the country to his own boyhood home. Silence prompted. "You may call me Goody, Mr. Commodore Bo-, no, it's Wenker you go by these days isn't it?" "You are most perceptive Madam" he responded, surprise mildly pumping into the autumn fugue. With a sigh, he answered the original question. "I imagine the river boat boys will have a tough time if it holds and, if the ice comes early. But you just can't tell the seasons here these days. They used to think that plowing would bring rain. Who knows what they think brings rain now?" She laughed, a forcibly polite sound, but still, even the icy blue chips in her eyes seemed amused. Enthusiasm and sparks of interest verging on passionate flame sprung out: "Mr.'s Wellington and Bolingbrook are easy enough- I know an Italian dandy from the smell alone, and they keep forgetting their own names." He forced a chuckle at that comment, but in truth the implication about the business partners floated past him like foam on a wave. He countenance caught that, and harshened, tensing the geometry of space between them, the eddies of the air which interchanged across the wide expanse. He suspected his ignorance about the affairs of the foreigners was offensive. He didn't feel the need to explain he was on vacation, or that he was barely lucid, preferring to pass off his haze as idle idylls of the late summer's heat.

The conversation continued, such as it was. "And Pastor Jansen- well, you've seen him with those girls." She clacked her tongue, and her tone became even more severe, matching the pursing fringe of golden brows. "Some men never learn that sticking your arm into snake pits will result in bites. Then there's old Danielson, the name alone is uninviting, but the way he keeps to his cups costs more. Fighting has scars on bellies and faces across this whole land, so I have no wonder he might be immoderate." She paused and turned slowly like a snake moving along a sunny rock, tension spreading around it. "But you?" She paused again. As she had spoken, he thought that the nor'easter had picked up ever so imperceptibly. "Perhaps you remind me of a knight in that uniform and cap, chasing a dragon over the rivers, looking for more gold..." a wistfulness in her voice? Marshy, marshy, he wasn't drowning, but this wasn't hard ground beneath him, soft turf that had sprung up when the forests had been torn apart. It was noted by the part of his brain that wasn't dozing to the dancing fields.

Into this conversation wandered a pack of asses. Rollo, a mule skinner for the day, or at least between 12 to 16 as scheduled, led them. Looking comically archaic in a straw hat and a staff as he walked them across the spokes of the settlement to a new pasture, he paused to nod with deep respect to "Goody" and maybe pretend to tilt his head at Jo. "The lifeblood of our little society, the beating heart of the town" Goody smiled and pointed at the pack of braying gray-brown animals. The same enthusiasm as before flickered back into her conversation: "We can always mix them with wild mares running in from the bloodlands, and then sell the mules to the army. You could say that we move from one direction, them from the other, and our lives mix in this little paradise of good earth. You'd never guess it in days like these, with so much

speed everywhere, but they need carry no fuel- it grows everywhere, and they're smart and tough in a pinch. Better offroad than things with wheels too. No need to carry new machine parts either" she smiled fully with pride as Rollo poked the braying pack down the gravel wheel to distant fields. It bemused him, but there was really no equivalent for the water. He had heard of ski patrols and mounties, of course, but- "Well, guys like me, it's an engine or paddling up a creek. No one's figured out how to train fish to pull us yet" and he attempted to smile. It did explain part of the town's continued financial existence he figured. A strange experiment with the endless lands "opened" by men with guns.

"And all blonds" he said, but now he wasn't talking about the same asses. "Were you already a group in Normandy?" he asked, but her accent had answered long before she opened her lips. "Heavens no! Can't you tell I'm a German, with my rosy cheeks?" and he shuffled his cap in feigned embarrassment of realization. He had to be careful not to tip his hand. She might not be calling his bluff- she might be toying with him, like a cat and an unlucky mouse. He was starting to get the idea though, the same faces even more uniform here than in a reserved train cabin, no tobacco, meat only for guests. Even the labor draft schedule. That kind of thing, one of the real Spiritualist groups where everyone was all synchronized up inside (or at least, billed themselves that way). How did that escape from the modern world, the sooty city, big and jostling really work? Was it so different here from the lice in the great mausoleums of the capital, the railroad barons, from officers with giant houses and titanic plots and ticky tack towns of people shuffling canned food around? "Is this so wonderful a life you have made here in this wilderness?" he asked, and the wind blew back breaths breathed of cold spray gushing past patrol-boat gunwales, chattering cannons and fleeing bandits and reds with their children and their tips.

Of course, it was wonderful. The little feuds between cottages never sparked a civil war. As far as he could tell, nothing more serious than a fistfight ever took place. The air was fresh and the cider bubbly, their livestock sleek and well fed, their soil rich, and always a spare bed for guests, never an extra body tossed to the cold or forced to the road. Little spurts of white smoke from a forge went up at odd hours to be sure, but never enough to choke on, and it dispersed fast into the open skies. With enough nod behind his eyes, he could even appreciate the animal rhythms of the fucking below him, no rail whistle to interrupt the vibrating, cycling, pattern of guttural sounds. They have made a garden and called it civilization, he thought. Maybe no almond trees, no oranges crated around, but ripe fruit and nuts and corn aplenty. Perhaps they were at the mercy of a single bad harvest? But then they had their animals. Destined to be replaced by some iron-bull that replaced mules? How long could they last as the weather shifted with the forests and the plains that surged and receded behind the borders of nations and farms out here?

The moon was melting back into a harvest sickle and the woods were burning in a red-gold fire that left only gray bones behind. He couldn't be surprised, still caught in his perpetual haze of re-injections and nature-soaked brain waves, so when it was conveyed that the business men, dandies, foreign, whatever, "left early" on what Rollo assured him was an "urgent matter", it barely registered. It had been so urgent that their fine hats sat out at a table for a meal too long. Was the bread kiln any greasier than it had been the night before? Still, rich spiced sausage giving his shitless sphincters indigestion, he kicked the ice and locked up the needle case. Maybe it was fever-dreams, paranoia, madness. Maybe just too much pent up energy flowing in

him, in the people around him, in every inhalation throughout the whole sleepy wheel. No need anymore to hide from evil eyes. Even Rollo seemed to warm to him.

Serendipitously, the next day as he nursed his coldly sober forehead, the word was that a telegram arrived signaling a train just two middays ahead. After spending a while trying to parse with whether it was tomorrow or the day after, and when the telegram arrived, and what any of the shouting norman voices were trying to say, he almost regretted leaving the idyll so soon. Early, so early that the great bear was still lurking the pre-dawn sky of his last day, Rollo woke him by banging the ladder against the loft, shirtless, still zipping his pants. "A', t'e admirrrral! Well, we need an official shtamp. Come wit us- terrre's a community matterrrr to 'andle!" He said with tremendous vigor for the painful earliness of the hour. His watch glinted a quarter past three in the darkness of the bed. His training days at the academy still served him well, and his heart was already going at full pace as Jo stood up, slid down the ladder, and jumped into his long black leather boots. He was still in his thin red long johns. Rollo grabbed a rifle, and some rope, and passed a torch to Wanda and another to Jo. "Herrre, light i'on the coals, quick, we must come fast." As they exited the little cabin they could see a rider, silvery in the half moon, calling the houses out.

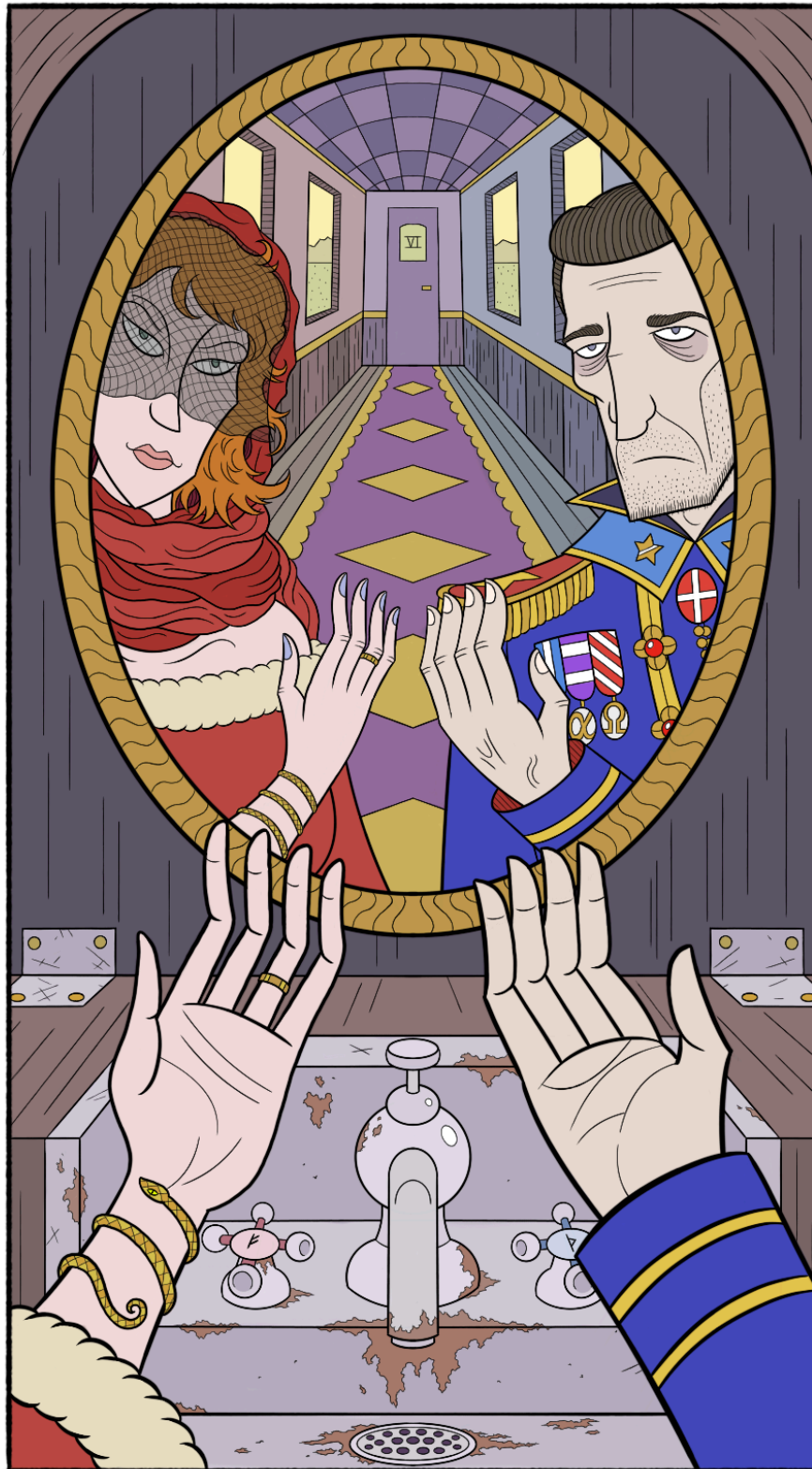
They reached the spoke where already a little crowd had formed, torches and shining guns. Goody stood at the head of the crowd, refined and statuesque even at this ungodly hour. "Our little Rosa, tonight, found the Pastor- our guest, a man we have taken in, fed, and clothed, standing by her bed, engaged in carnal activity." The crowd jeered, roaring with the animal ferocity of an organized crowd. "Of course, we can find no sin in pleasure, even from a hypocrite like that. But our Rosa was sleeping. He did not share his pleasure, he was not engaging us in our great social life. He had no rights to what he did. He took, without exchange or agreement, like a red thief in the night." The crowd cheered, and chanted, "To the lamp-posts! To the lamp-posts!" Then the tranquil wind of Goody's commanding voice sliced through again. "Guilty before us all, he has fled into the woods, smashing our windows, so hard to bring out here, in the process" and this seemed to provoke more genuine unexpected outrage "If he will not even stand to account for his own actions, how can he be treated like a man?" and like a tiger with torches twinkling its eyes, stripes of orange light and midnight shadow across the crowd, poles and guns like fangs and claws, roars howled into the starlit sky. "If he acts like an animal!, well-- let's treat him as he would treat us!" and with a graceful wave of her arm towards the wooded background, the crowd fanned out into the woods.

The phlegmatic preacher-man had no chance. He wasn't even in shoes when they pulled him out of a bramble patch fifteen minutes later. The whole group converged, and then they began to beat him with whatever they'd had at hand. Ferocious, fast animal violence, tension spilling out, and shadows leaping on the dutchman's face crumbled into dark stains of blood and contorted shapes. And then Rollo's rope came out, tawny threads in the night looping over and over and over indents of shadow, over themselves. And then, angry people, barely human, were wrapping them around the bare neck of a man, of this man, Jansen, sweat and blood congealing on his heaving and pale chest. Somewhere in the dark the old veteran had made his way next to Jo, waves of liquor rolling off his breath. "If he hadn't run they might have stopped at the beating. That's how it was in the camps for us- taking it, like a man, always better that way. Maybe not for a raider, like some rapacious Indianer probably would get the bayonet if we got him alone on a dark night. Or worse.

But these are civil folk. He shouldn't have run" and then he pulled from a silver flask, never offering the same release to Jo. The great ecstatic explosion of violence, the crowd heaved up and up, and Jansen heaved out and out. Vicious dancing torches, shaking limbs, gulps of air from both the man dangling and among the crowd jubilant in the release of all the energy. Civil folk. At least Jo had little to worry about. His fingers drummed a rhythm on his thigh through the cotton, half fear and panic, half anger. He would have to sign off on this as a Sheriff. No need to run, no need to run, no need to run. Why were men like the preacher? Why was justice done this way? Why, why, why, why? Anger, energy displaced from fear, mixed with the paranoid energy coursing through every vein.

Goody, breathless mouth under eyes wide and dark against her pale blonde face, veil askew, appeared next to him. Her chest heaving hot air, loud and urgent, pumping mists of steam into the night, kisses of air breathing against the long pipe-smoke breath that spilled from his own face. "So, Commodore, nothing illegal, all in order? Rubber stamp us if it comes up? The man was practically an outlaw rapist, you could see that?" she edged closer to him, her pale lips glazed by the orange moonlight- no torchlight- wet with moisture, eyes gazing at his stubble coated mouth. He knew what had to be done, knew what energy was flowing, leaned across the gulf between them, his cheek almost grazing hers, little perturbations of air in skin and stubble, breath into her delicate ear "Oh course not my dear- it's a wonderful life you let me observe" and then, as he pulled away he let his face drift, she let her face drift, their lips grazed in the dark, unnoticed by the dancing torches and the raucous village as they began to grab at each other, grappling, grasping, reaching through fabric, two bodies touching in glancing blows, moving away in the night to some soft bed, venting all the excess worry, the anxiety and fear, finally in a moment of passion and anger, and maybe fear, moving into and out of orbits slipping into the calm of sleep.

4: Le Navire et Le Phare



There was no dream, only the feverish living nightmare of his liver's pyrrhic cleansing period, an aching long refractory night of fever-sweats and sleepless spinning. The moon was half a gold doubloon, some stolen treasure buried in the land, rising through the half-skeletal trees, the dark lines of their bare branches disrupted by the occasional long suffering leaf. The whole of the world was black against the eerie light from the horizon. He turned hard on his heels, hearing a crackling sound behind him, and saw that the yellow grass- which strangely enough now had a silver tint, was a path which led into another corner of the woods. He rubbed his eyes, and then rubbed himself. But the coat he was expecting to feel wasn't there. His hands hit the black cotton long johns he wore to sleep. He looked down and saw his bare feet looking back at him. Where was he? He rubbed his arms again- there had been unseasonable snow two days ago, and now the days were unseasonably warm, but warm or cold, the thin cotton wasn't gear for the clime. Somewhere behind the darkness that the moonlit path pointed towards, something bayed. Was it a dog or a wolf? No way back but forward, he mused, and plunged into the strange silvery-gold trail of trampled grass.

In the darkness he thought he could make out long thin wires strung out through trees in the distance, but a signal line out here? It made no sense. He reached towards a pocket, only to remember that he had none. Were there bears out here? Was the rustling bramble at the edge of the grass a stalking predator or just the wind? Shivering, he grabbed a large stick, not too heavy to make an admirable staff, ample support for his campaign. How had he gotten here? He seemed to remember a midnight squash harvest gone astray, but where had all the villagers vanished too? He pushed forward, his feet cut from the jagged dry grass, scrapped by the sticks that stuck out from the deep woods. Why would anyone have been harvesting squash so late in the year, at so dark an hour? It all seemed like a dream, but here he was, alone in the dark, shivering with cold, the moon's glow only just seeping through the trees that now enveloped him, really here. He felt it, he could feel his heart pounding to keep him alert and warm, to push back against the low temperatures that the damp cloth brought. But the moon still shone through enough to illuminate a road that the path met, gravel and lined with rotting wood. He knew this road! Where there was a road like this, there were people like him, surely, and maybe even the bed that he just couldn't quite recall having laid in earlier that night. Pushing down the path, the musty scent of the wood, the shadows in the darkness behind the trees, the dying breaths of wind, he felt panic rising in him, the old primeval fear of the wild, and it took every ounce of discipline to keep from calling out, from running and screaming.

He saw the main mess of the town up ahead! Here at last! And a light flickering in the window still! And then he did run. But as he reached the building, he saw that it had been gutted by an old fire- scorched beams sagged, heavy with the fall wood rots, and the flickering of the ghost-light now seemed an evil omen. What had happened? The panic rose in waves now, every breath threatening to bring it pouring out in screams and cries- had he missed a raid? What forces had moved the hands of time to rot the sturdy wood here, over a single night? Had he hit his head, slept for a thousand years while the old world had tumbled down around him, been ripped through a wrinkle in time? Had an alien force possessed him? Were there raiders or monsters still worse out? He did start to jog now, forcing the fear into his legs, turning it into energy to fuel his numb legs, panting out what was left, like the sweet smell on a drunk's breathe, down the old road toward the farmstead he had been put up in- and like a dream it fell together. The old mess, which had been burned a decade back was in his distance- the new mess, the one he knew, was dead ahead, and the flickering lights in the orange squash, seasonal decorations of the village, flickered at every homestead. He crept in through his bedroom window, left strangely open, dove into the warmth of the feather spread, didn't even stop to leave his damp clothes behind, snuggling deep into the folds of the bed, into the bliss of oblivion.

The loud whine of the steam whistle “station stop in sight” woke him. From the little lamp in the cabin he could see that the sun was gone, and with the new moon the night sky was black satin, and the stars were dancing ruffles in the velveteen fabric. His pocket watch read 20h30. Judging his belt slack enough around his summer gut, he decided he could afford to explore the menu’s farm offerings, and duly hauled himself towards the dining car. Schindler-Thyssen Mountain-River Rail Line seemed to have been able to evade the privations of smallholder farms and thieving red bandits for this meal at least. Hearty descriptions of thick-cut homestead bread, cheap beans in beet-syrup and fried flank steaks posed alluringly on the meal-list. The bread *was* fresh out here, not like the flaccid starch of the Capitol, black, dense, and full of rye-taste, which let him escape with the pretense of a quality diet that cheap white flour would not have allowed. Well, if the rail lines weren’t being fleeced by the farmers they must’ve had to make it back fleecing the customers. He managed to refrain from ordering a bottle of wine (God’s grace, he muttered at the thought of dreg-filled poisonous drink) and instead asked for black tea with lemon, an old local taste.

The next stop of the line arrived before his order, and so he sat pressed along a stiffly starched white table with three empty chairs, silence mixing with the flickering lights that appeared from the dreary endless plains, drabber for their autumn browns and fading violet twilight. An Officer couldn’t pretend to miss company, especially not that of a crowded farm table, he reminded himself, that he had so recently scorned. So there he sat, looking as regal as possible, alone, all dressed up, and nowhere to go. A little exodus from the town of Yellow Hall boarded onto the train, families, young men, and what must have been the brothers, younger still, of young men, brides escorted by brothers bound for farms on the edge of the wild, fort postings, or trade in the big city. Evidently the harvest was swell here, as they mostly headed down past the meals towards private cabins, though a few vagrants peeled off for the general seating. Following this most proper group of farmers and families were those who sought recourse in dangerous work. Men with thick, thick, bed bundles carrying their tools: pickaxes, saws, hammers, ropes, and rifles. Soldiering, overseeing, mining, lumberjacking, droving, whatever needed to be done that the chain gangs and slaves couldn’t be trusted with. Maybe even joining the plague of Reds who thieved along the far frontiers. Then the assorted collection of characters who had fallen out of the bottom of bourgeois society, dregs at the bottom of the barrel of life streaming towards the terminus of civilization, reeking of booze and cheap tobacco.

Most had the good sense to unroll blankets and doze off in the public seating. Proper society, with money and few children, hesitated, wavering, then attracted like a moth to a burning flame came to the dining car. It seemed like quite the push to the frontier this season, more people leaving than usual, filling every table, in due course guilty stragglers even imposing themselves at his own. Relief at not being a pariah; annoyance at the quality of his neighbors. First a bedraggled man in a long ago ironed suit, lines aside in desperate need of cleaning sat. In a thick rather Southern accent he loudly declared to find “a seat lookin’ empty enough fo’ me, and us salt-earth folk don’t let such a thing go to waste eh?” before introducing himself as a Doctor (no name need follow), bound to aid the little towns in need of health- although from his yellow and flabby face, it would seem his advice was ill-placed. He was joined at the cramped table by a woman, rather too nicely put together to be traveling with the Doc. A half second behind her was another woman, from whose nose he took to be her sister, to complete the set of four. Doc, called Dr. Burke around the fairer sex, evidently was not

married given the gaze he cast at the woman, who sat. Jo tried to keep his gaze from lingering across the shape of her cheeks and her strong dark brows, away from the shoulder-line adorned in white fur, directing any questing notions towards that still absent plate of food.

A reflex followed his mental exertion, and he extended his hand across the short table to the Doctor, the copper-haired woman, and her darker sister, squeezing a bit too firmly at the end. The woman was polite enough to match his folly with her own soft comment; "A firm handshake, sir". Her sister's eyes flickered a glance between the two of them, then at the Doctor, lingering there rather with contempt if he had been capable of paying attention. Jo sat, off kilt for a moment, staring at those eyes, her mineral gaze of gray jade with a look that must have been blank or confused- equally perilous and terrifying cliffs. He could only hope it didn't seem worse. It seemed they had locked gazes, and were staring at themselves, but his mind had shrunk rather blankly, and it took every ounce of inbred manner to force a small smile out. Deep in the back of his brain, the impression that her eyes were somewhere between slate gray and pale blue. If you had asked him he would have guessed olive, or simply black at the pupil, but nowhere did a real color permeate conscious thought. She couldn't have met his gaze for ten seconds but it could have been ten minutes of silence, the dance of sizing each other up. His heart began to beat suddenly; hopefully.

His plan didn't account for spontaneous fits of this idiocy, so it was fortunate that years of misuse had fried his brain. "Where are you folks headed?" his dumb mouth spilled out. "Folks?" Where had that hickish vernacular come from? The good Burke sort of saved him in a brusque and slightly soused fashion. "Out west, some ranch towns, that kind of thing. They ran me out of my practice back in the c-Capitol! Me!" He motioned a thick thumb towards himself. "A-and after all I did for the war here!" He shook his unshaved jowls. "But hey, kid, I already said this, you tea-drinkers just can't listen." Burke leaned out towards the isle, caught in a manic spasmic moment spilling from his stainless hip-flask. "Hey! Waiter, you got any kind of schnapps at the bar? Eh, I can pay, in Silver Eagles too!" Copper-head curled her lips slightly and dove with vigor into her menu. Her sister's eyes seemed to be alight with mirth. The woman spoke up at last, her voice a little low and a little rough. "You can call me Ilona. This is my sister, Anne-Lena. Our husbands services are coming to an end and we hope to join them prospecting in the mountains after this."

"The mountains?" Jo asked, taken aback. "Those are pretty savage, you know, the Army doesn't really hold them. Lots of Reds and bandits and bears-" "Oh My!" she responded, a laugh lurking beneath her exclamation. "I think though, that there isn't protection money can't buy" and dropping her voice lower, like a conspirator "they say there's gold in those hills" and this time she couldn't keep the laugh down, "or at least in the pants of the miners" There was something irresistible in her charisma, and yet-how could he not feel illness in the drive to push ever further out, into the mountains and hills of refuge for the people they'd shoved off the plains, cut down forests and kill animals, looking for gold? He thought about what he had seen done in the shadow of those peaks. Her eyes drew his back to them, pools of sweet recognition, enthusiastic, dancing and alive. Had she really said 'husband'?

An extended and awkward gaze, one he tried to keep his sadness from, was avoided by the waiter's prophylactic arrival, bringing schnapps, a bowl of the rye bread for the table, and the steak and beans at long last. He tried to look at the meat and not think about those eyes. It had been a long time since something like this had

happened, and of course it was- well. He cut a nice strip off the steak, wet and pink. He couldn't stop himself from glancing back at her, like he was just a kid again. Had she turned away right as he glanced at her, or had she never looked? Just as he was starting to have fun playing with his heart through the mouthful of steak, she caught his eye with her own. He felt tired and sick at his heart-song, the meat turning ashen in his mouth. Ballads were better left in achingly unreal dreams than the vicissitudes of real life. He felt unmoored in space, vibrations from the carriage wheels pounding, steel on steel, steel on steel, his arm stretched out across the table to the little salt bowl at the end, steel on steel, steel on flesh, flesh on salt. It had been a while since he had supped in such close company on a train, so it was an understandable misstep. Unfortunately the good Doctor was at that moment also reaching a decrypt arm for the big brown bottle before him, and the next jolt was a bigger misstep, a collision, spiraling further, soaking Ilona and her beautiful furs in the syrupy liquor.

Burke immediately blustered his way out of the situation. "You damn Navy fool! I'd love to see you try and stand on a boat...", disheveled sleeve wiping at the gray whiskers around the trembling pale lips, "My schnapps was right there, what were you doing man? Look at what you've done, a whole bottle... just gone to waste!" Those jade eyes held no mirth, and for an instant he wanted to deflate into the greatcoat. 'Be a man'. "You? Are you alright my dear neighbor?" he asked, trying to avoid invoking the spell of her name, failing, "look here Ms. Ilona, I'm sure there's a stevedore or some sort of- servant on this train, I'll see that your fine dress is properly handled, if you-" "Why, no, my dear officer, I rather think your hands have done enough to my furs." She began to rise, exhibiting cruel vigor and grace in fur-clad movement. "I can see this isn't at all the kind of company we might have expected from someone in such a gaudy peacock of a uniform. Are they letting just anyone get gold braid these days?" And with that note, left stinging like cold salt spray, she and her sister departed. At the frosted glass-door of the compartment, he saw Anne-Lena shoot him with a foul look, and then he and the Doctor were left alone with a schnapps soaked spread as the wheels churned onwards below.

Although he wanted to do nothing of the sort, would have preferred the comfort of a hypo in his berth's clean linens, decorum- and there was still the decorum of proper life, in a dining car in a train, even moving out through the hinterlands of civilized life, a law dictating that as the superior (in his mind at least- with doctors you could never be sure), he was bound to repair this. His sense of decorum anyway. Truthfully, even in the cities, few really had use for that kind of thing, outside of the rules of the game. So he had another bottle of the brown prune liquor brought over, and he tried to rinse out the unpleasant events with little glasses of the simperingly sweet drink. He knew he could get a bad drunk on, especially when he left himself alone, but in civil public he was still capable of holding himself to a limit, hard-practiced and learned through his closely policed youth. A strategy of tension, as it were, to keep himself high-strung and never more than moderately inebriated- but that required the tension to be drained, lancing the pustule of propriety and proportion in his own quarters. The doctor on the other hand, had no inhibitions about drink and was sinking to a state more befitting a slobbering animal than a man in a collared suit. Maybe that was why he had fallen on hard luck in the cities- damn decorum, but you'd be damned if you ignored it too much too. That was why civilization needed closed doors, not like the open cabins of the world outside the train.

Burke, saliva dripping into his scrubbly beard, dipping his face towards the bottle like a stork drinking, began to talk like the old drunk he was. He poured out about his time in the VG back during the “War Days”, fighting against the fire-eating slave powers.

“It was back, oh I don’t know, the days were heating up and the Fourth, you know National Victory Day, all that, and the spring mud melt had come and gone in that part of the country. Well, we were out more like a posse than a- uh, you know how things were. Out there it was, well, not untamed like, but- any-anyhow, all the, locals were out, trying to do wolf sounds, scare us out- guess they must have liked their jobs overseeing the apple plantations or whatever they had, anyhow, anyhow we’d been getting shot out at in this orchard. ... There’s a big blonde feller, Ludwig or whasit, got clipped in the arm (he gestured soberly above the elbow) and chrissakes, or pardon- anyhow, the bullet musta hit the bone’n’artery- (he dove sanguinously into graphic detail about the wound and the blood therein) - and, and so I’d gotta amputate it- you know and I told him, and he said- ‘better the hawlf than the wholf- (Burke started chuckling here) but look Dowc, don’t youse swear to take no ‘arm?’”

He broke into a sobbing laugh and reached for another drink. “Ah, to be young like you are again. Had a- a- sweetheart back then, but now-- after I came back...” he gestured to the bottle, almost knocked it over, and took another long swig. “Only true company of a man out here.” He turned, eyes glassy and stained like the carriage windows with rain and fog. “Don’t you have a story to tell, feller?” Jo felt an eyebrow raise, turned, caught a glimpse in his mind of a fox tail disappearing into the next carriage, and decided to make his leap. “None worth hearing.” And then he left the inconsolable thing at the table, true company still in his shaking hands.

He made his way back up the train, swaying gently too and fro. He felt tired, and a little stomach-sick. The frosted glass glowed from the fog-lamps outside, autumn gold light shining on nut-brown doors which rose forest like from a plush green-velvet carpet. A sudden jolt on the immense iron bones below, a single gap in the continental span of their unified line, and he felt the whole compartment lurch to the left, bucking him forward. He thrust out an elbow, but it pushed something in, and he fell head over ass into the mossy crush of the velvet floor. He turned back to see what he had stumbled into. He could barely find words to describe it, but it was damp, visibly half shaven arch of pure granite, hints of topaz veins somewhere below the surface, a tensed calf. His eyes started to trace up when a voice pulled his gaze up fast enough to crick his neck, copper haired Anne-Lena smiling maliciously into his bloodshot eyes. “Look what I caught darling sister,” she called into the chamber, “that fish from the table. Seems he doesn’t walk any better than he holds a glass. He’s all laid out like a fresh catch for you dear, just in front” Before any reply could sound out from behind the inner door, he rushingly pushed himself to his feet, tipped his cap, and apologized to the bitch. In his stomach he felt the bitter humor of a failed landing. “That’s twice I’ve spilled out in front of you ma’am, I’ll aim not to let a third transpire. Good night to you, and to your sister.” As he turned and beat a shamefully hasty retreat towards his own bunk, he heard a harsh nasal “D’ye hear that Ilona, he *wished* you a good night! Hah!”

It had to have been an hour and a half later that he found himself staring at the twisting ball of tungsten filament, glowing with heavenly radiance in front of the dingy bathroom mirror, reflecting splotches of lime on his dirty undershirt. He felt a tremendous nervous energy pervading him, and the urge to run, to fight, to do violence, to- anything really, just a great force like wind or surf pushing him. This was another terrible pit he felt himself falling into. It was like whiskey, after ten months of hard sober work, just looking for a way to wash out the murk of time, sweet glass after sweet glance, gazes and stares and the splash of a drink around the lips, burning metric volumes of excess to illuminate a short, dark life. How had he made it so far? Well, because he expected to be burnt and dropped into the sewers at any moment, so there was really nothing for it but to fall, fall into glasses and gazes, down into honey whiskey and sour mash and- whatever crevasse leaned up towards him.

He stared back at himself from out the smudged mirror, looking older than he ought to have in electric light. Years of hard drinking and sea-sun had lined his face, below the line of shade from his officer's hat, and the salt and pepper beard he had subsequently grown out did not fully erase them. He still had a good head of dark hair at least, already streaked with gray from the stresses of hard liquor and paranoid dreams. His eyes, pale blue, flecked with spots of gray, like ice mountains tossed in North Sea waves. He could feel the heat of the metal coil echoing against his eyes, dizzying him. If he was up, he was up- so he started soaking and scrubbing his uniform in the little steel basin under the mirror, and only made it halfway before the need to sleep returned. Nothing like a good bout of productive activity to chasten the soul. He forced himself to finish scrubbing it, go under the buttons and the sleeves, get out the smells and any little stains and splotches. Finally it seemed, half in an unconscious fugue of fatigue, he got it hung over the heat vent in the berth, drip drip dripping as the hot air from the boiler rushed through countless serpentine pipes under the wet fabric, drifting to sleep with the quiet pitter of his hanging ghost beside the bunk and the cold fall rain against the panes. The train sped on across the night, past fields and farms and foot roads as old as that feeling he couldn't name.

Morning came, bringing no real respite, a slate gray horizon of mist and cloud over austere landscapes of dry corn. Freight delays had caused the train to halt again, and the conspicuous lack of motion and sound greeted his pounding head, more unsettling than the sensation of constant movement, which had lulled him like the sea. He shaved and trimmed around his beard, tidied his room putting a sprawl of papers back into his brief tucked against his spare shirts, folding his sheets, searching for the pretense of propriety. His uniform, rather covered in wrinkles, he felt concerned enough to leave to the stevedore for an ironing, and then went back to his civvies, mixed denim, well worn plaid, and a leather vest, under a black leather overcoat, perfumed with rich tobacco. He had had enough of being a peacock, and desired to drink more without risking the braid. The dining car beckoned to him to break his fast.

Despite the unpleasant events of the previous evening, his table was still occupied by his companions, creatures of habit like all people. Burke was sitting crosswise from Anne-Lena who seemed to be focusing intensely on a fresh farm egg (fried) than on her compatriot in dining. For his part, Burke looked hardly worse for wear. Jo called the waiter, and given the halt, managed to get some fresh cream and boiled oats alongside his egg and coffee. There was no conversation as he waited for his food. Anne-Lena sat staring at her plate, Burke tried to hide behind his newspaper

and his overcoat as he greedily sucked at a flask, and the quiet murmur of family conversation did little to replace the comfortable sound of the engine and the tracks. His meal arrived, and then thirty seconds later Ilona entered, dressed in cream and green silks, intimidating in its excess much as a uniform. He felt the discomfort of his leather and denim- perfectly adequate and yet so lacking and discombobulated. She greeted the table, maybe him? with a smile and sat, swiping her sister's cup of coffee. She blew on it, steam curling off the cup over the shapely curves of her lips and mouth. A single thin strand of dark hair drifted out over her brows, curling ever so slightly in the gray morning.

Doctor Burke tucked the steel flask into the side of his pocket before handing over the paper, breathed in the smell of the fried egg next to him and gestured for the waiter. Curious, and in need of something to do while his brain warmed up for small talk he glanced over the paper, a local rag. Of course these days, the military dispatches went out along the wires, and as long as you could get a connection you'd be able to get your orders and updates. Things like this were probably slipping into the hands of the Reds on this side of the big river. It was mostly local news- wedding announcements and births, a column on a fracas at a local town election, and one Party bigwig or another trying to manipulate the vote and keep the place unincorporated. There was an astrology column, which was of course wretched superstition, and yet always a little enjoyable, as all things devilish are. He was browsing this, looking for a sign in the stars to riddle out his place on Earth when the ladies evidently grew bored with the lacking conversation. "What's in the paper then, officer?" "Well, uh, there's local notices, uh town meetings, politics uh, that kind of thing," but the bluff was unsuccessful, as those were clearly on the outersheet. Ilona leaned across the table, putting a hand which felt heavy, fingers almost wrapping around his sleeve, peering over the top of the page. "Astrology! Don't tell me you put any stock in that sort of thing!" "It's- well I guess a guilty pleasure. You know. It's not *real* of course but-" "If you believe in any hokum like that, you should put it in hand-lines, there's a real part of you." "Well, I'll let you know when newspapers start reading hands" he replied dryly. "Oh but Ilona reads palms!" Anne-Lena interjected, "a distant relation is said to have been part gypsy!" Jo tried not to visibly recoil for a second, but remembered the weight of the hand resting on his arm and relaxed. "Well, what do you charge-" he almost said 'gypsy woman' but decided against it. "-for a hand reading" he ended lamely to fill in the hole left there. "Only a first-born child" she mocked, "come to the cabin some time and I'll give you a reading." She released his arm, which sat still on the table, yearning.

Ilona got her cabin ready. Dusk was approaching through the October haze and piles of dead leaves, drab and wet alongside the shining steel of the track, mirrored the grim overcast. Drizzle and mist set an appropriate atmosphere for this kind of thing. She put on a long shawl of red wool and a black veil. With the train still stalled, she thought herself safe setting a long beeswax candle alight. Ready to go, she entertained herself with a book of French poems which fit the mode, odes to dolorous gray skies, depressed lusts, spurts of dark frenzy, chants of the Rhein, all kinds of evil flowers of the soul. Anne-Lena who was purporting motives that may or may not have been tangible, had left the cabin to sit in the observation car, leaving strict orders not the place smelling. How! A knock, nothing remarkable about it, sounded from the wooden panel of the door, "Come in, wayward traveler, come in," and he came. He had a look

that was both sallow and dark, lean and tormented looking. He had changed from his ludicrous motley and was back in his flatteringly officious uniform blue like the sea and sparkling with gold. Something fluttered somewhere when he looked at her like a sad dog. "Here, sit here" it was only a wicker train chair, but something about it added false antiquity to the chilly atmosphere, "and lay your left hand flat on the table, palm facing up."

The hand on the table was smooth and uncalledoused, well articulated fingers haunted by shades of ink that couldn't be washed out, like memories of a bruise. Evidently the navy life in this modern age wasn't so reliant on pulling rope. She took hold of it, pulling it and spreading the palm open wide, unfurling the fingers and feeling the movement of the bones and tendons of the thing. The burning blue eyes deep set under salt-and-pepper brows stared at her, curious and unnerving, hidden shapes beneath the iris. She concentrated on the lines of the hand, drawing herself close, close enough for the skin to feel her breath. "You have a strong head and heart line, well worn" she moved her thumbs along the parallel arches, massaging with expertise as the lines arched away from each other, "but they diverge, pulling in opposite directions. The heart line... in the end it is the stronger." She stood up and repositioned her chair closer to him, smelling alcohol maybe just aftershave, on his face and the scent of fresh soap on his deep blue uniform. "Look down here, at the base of the palm" she brushed her wrist against his own, "these two lines which shoot off. This, on the right, do you see it? He nodded, leaning forward, brushing the stiff shoulder of his jacket against her own shawl covered body in the most delicate way, a solid presence at her side, breathing along with her. Was he trying to match his breath? It was off a beat or two, but... She refocused on the hand. "This is the solar line. It forecasts..." and then it struck her that this in fact wasn't the solar line and she had been a little hasty. The man had no solar line, strangely absent, and instead his fate line stretched ominously out alone before a sudden break. Could she admit this error? "A life in the Sun- a life of celebration and acclaim!" she looked back at him for some reaction, looking at those blue unblinking wells which gazed back.

Committed to her lie, she now had to find something for a fate line. She seized on a convenient split in the arching life line. It wouldn't have passed anyone who knew much about palms, but that was a gamble she would take with someone who blushed at the mention of astrology. "Here we can see your life line, spurting off short as the great arc merges with the spread of the line of *fate*." She paused to collect herself around this mistruth, so small in the grand scheme, so inescapable when it was an issue of destined trust. "Perhaps the norns are showing that in pursuit of a great destiny favored by the sun, your line will be snipped early... or perhaps diverge from family towards a certain destiny..." she softly traced the line swirling over the base of the palm and thumb, pressing the hand flat against the table and feeling the warm flesh like soft putty under a dancing, gliding, finger. "A tragic palm, cursed by fate." She looked back at his eyes, wells of blue, glazed and iced over. "Nothing I don't know already" he said, and it felt mechanical, stiff lips moving with the well trimmed wall of hair around his face. "But then again, maybe that's the point. All signs from the future pointing towards some tragic end. Well," he said well too much, like a nervous tick, "let me-" and he broke off. Watching his tired visage was like seeing the mechanisms of clockwork behind a glass face. Punctual and meticulous in his ticks, transparent as could be, so similar to the tidy facade he had put on for her with his dress. What a tightly ordered life one would have to live aboard a ship! The gears clicked and ground beneath his eyes before striking five- "offer a coffee or a wine to a finely performed

reading as this one?" It was a stilted offer, abortive and desperate in delivery, almost insincere, but authentic to the lines on his hand and his brow, and she felt strangely warmed by his formalism. She nodded, the shawl dipping perilously towards the candle before she straightened herself. "A coffee perhaps, or maybe warmed wine and tales of the East for a lady whose own destiny lies thataway." His eyes glazed with that ice again, as he pulled back from the candle-light.

The train windows were covered with the lickspittle frost from the wet fall weather, mixing with the brown rust of leaf rot in the skeleton woods around the train. Somewhere beyond them, back in the corn fields, the harvest was ending and the little people would have been breaking bread in thanksgiving after a hard day on the combines. The worn mahogany varnish of the bar held stains of a hundred long past conversations, woven into the warp and blister of the sheen, stained with a hundred thousand little spills and spatters. Ilona ordered a coffee, à la Turc, seasoned with anise, while the navy man took a simple cup, jet black and bitter. The server was Hungarian, and not immediately engaged with anything besides the aromatic steam from the bone-white porcelain, she struck up a conversation about the old country. "My father was a Hungarian cavalryman" she said, gauging Josia for a reaction, but he gave none, only staring into his coffee. He came from Klausenberg, or euh, Kolozsvár." The server nodded. He knew the place, but only by name. He was the second son of a peasant and had hoped to work his way into a plot of his own to work out on this new frontier. This comment animated the man beside her. "Where about are you looking?" he asked in a coffee-roughened voice. The server said he dreamed of somewhere out on the south plains- less to worry about in the winters. She shivered with the idea of her mountain enterprise. "Well," Josia started "you ought to be careful. Lots of real 'Geronimos' out there, reds and amazons who'll scalp a man- a woman too- as soon as look. There're still plots in more civil places, and better for the health there." "Worse for the wallet though, sir, and I'm sure brave army men like you'll be there for us." Josia's face went disturbingly blank and still. Then he looked up at her, piercing her soul with his eyes. "But what about you, fair Ilona? Aren't you bound for some gold mining with your husband?" and she wondered what he thought about her husband.

She loved Addie, of course, really and truly but while this Navy fellow was not really a ladies man, Addie was no man at all for a lady. Perfect for a woman like her, really. Perhaps that was why she loved him so fully, enough to follow him on his wild idea of setting up an "entertainment house" for what he promised was a rising tide of miners who would have gold to spend and little to spend it on. Why not bring in some other women, looking for new lives, maybe manumitted slaves, offer them a chance for a new life in a new world out there? The idea was... she found it grand, but also embarrassing, a little like talking about her husband with other men. "That's the idea," she said. This provoked an askew glance, nothing more. They sat there, comfortably silent, as their coffees ran down the pale porcelain beneath, lost in thought, taking nothing more than the occasional glance. She thought about taking his hand and leading him back to his room, to spend some time lost in silence and whispers wrapped in each other's alien arms, the pleasure of human warmth, no more- two souls in impossibly intimate, cold, non-intimacy. It was natural and good to do, but. But what? She felt a shiver of cold, and wondered if there was any power in a lie, in making the lines out to be something they weren't and weaving destiny out of whole cloth.

Waves of night-black coffee rose, crashing in red-brown crests against the porcelain white cups, sand-staining the edges and the plate below. A jolt of ten thousand charging horses broke forth as the train leapt forward. Like a comic moment in time, the coffee cup to her left tilted precariously and then dove towards her. Like moving through a pool of mud instead of time's normal crystal stream, she fumbled forward for the leaping china, catching it around the rim, barely splashing her fingers with the heated liquid. No sooner had she begun to grip the cup than she found her hand locked like Iron, caught in its turn by the clumsy officer beside her. Like a live spark running along the iron tracks into the charging steel wheels, a flare of energy- heat-frisson- passed through the brief connection, and then circuited back again through entwined gazes.

As she lay her head against his undershirt, she thought about his fate line, broken early. His chest pulled in and out against her pressed cheek, breathing in his smells- sandalwood soap, sweat, faint tobacco and sulfur, clove oil for congestion. Sallow, and pale, and distant like a corpse maybe, but warm arms still wrapped around her, holding her safe. The train had stopped to let freight pass the narrow trackway again, and the only movement was the slow rhythm of human breath. A shiver passed through her- was this what they would be like, out there, at the end of the world? Was this life worth it for the freedom and the money-life they could bring out past the end of the world?

They had lain in the darkness, cuddling and huddled for a while, speaking in murmurs, keeping each other company and nothing else, soft whispers fading into the still night of the stopped train, witch-lights casting out their pale glows onto the drab fall fog outside the train-windows. Their conversation had been like a trip into a maelstrom, a whirlpool, pulling inexorably down. Maybe he was as doomed as the lines on his hands read, maybe his fate had already been shorn short by the norms above. His breath still came, pulling in and out, perhaps like the tides he must have known so well.

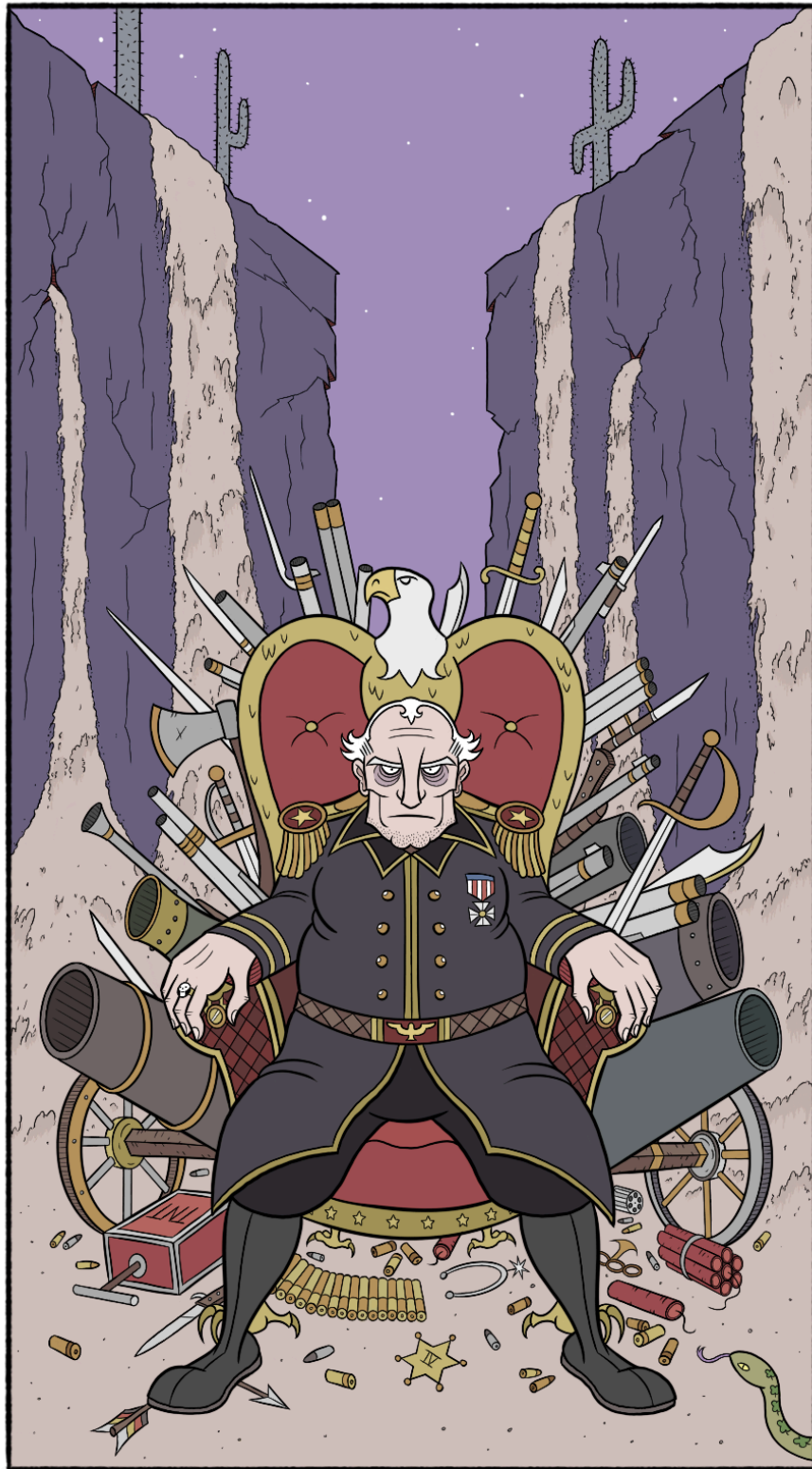
Slate gray dawn was only starting to rustle from behind the veiled and starless night when he brushed his rough stubble-bound face against her forehead, kissing and pulling her in. An impulse to pull him to her, to caress him, came and went like a shooting star. It was nearly dawn, and Annie wouldn't care for that. The chance had come and passed in the distant, prune-whiskey soaked dark, an undestined that had never been put into flesh. "It's too late. I have to make myself ready for business in the laketown, purchases and bargains for the frontier" she whispered almost sadly into his ear, soft hairs on his skin dancing to her voice. A slight, laughable sigh came from below her neck. In a different life it could have been tragic, but as it was she struggled to contain a derisive chuckle. Instead she stroked his head, ever the caring hostess.

Think of the fires, that voice beside her breasts murmured, muffled by a linen veil of cloth. Think of the dangers. Typical man. "The mountain valleys will stay moist, silly." Then, a bit of a harsh note, defensive, "I can handle myself. Don't you think I've done legwork at all for this?" His next sigh was even longer. Behind it, like behind the crush of water at the center of a vortex, meaning that was hidden, meaning that wasn't anything but the forces in the churning mael of water, meaning that danced and crushed. She rolled her eyes. Whatever it was- moralizing churchman, patronizing soldier, desperately insecure professional, traumatized infant- there was nothing new

under the sun. The sun. The slate gray of dawn was leaking steadily up into the dark sky. She let herself lie there, for a moment, lingering in intermingled breaths and limbs, and then, cursing and cutting at the passage of time, she rolled away.

Below the bed, an empty bottle, clear glass rippling the dim light of her comfortable cabin around it, like the heat of the furnace-pipes in the cold morning. She grabbed it, folded it into the thin, ink-stained hands of the man in her bed. "Take this when you go. I don't want Annie to know." The fates alone knew what a headache of haranguing that would provoke. His eyes, streaked red under dark brows, stared like a dead man towards the ceiling. Then he stiffly jerked a nod and vanished into the gloomy pre-dawn, towards the door, leaving only a slowly chilling spot of warmth beneath the woolen blanket, leaving her to drift towards hazy rest.

5: The Hall of the Mountain King



The universe was ticking again, that great clockwork-machinery of orbits and stars and chance. Tick-tick-tick-tick like the embossed clock on the wall of the foyer where he waited. His rough boots, muddy and foul smelling soles under the black shine he had given them that morning, sin that could not be hidden. The huge golden clock-face stood as if on a high pulpit preaching to the crowd of travelers, never once hesitating or falling behind, progressing eternally along the inscribed lines from which no man's will could make it stray. A secret icon of his, a man, it was whispered who had been a watchmaker long ago, some menial mechanist. This one man had seen the old country's heart fill with sinful hate and pride. He, like many, might have fled to a new world. But he had stayed. As if he was himself a wristwatch the man had wound his every moment of breath tight, as his daily work and daily bread came and went, until righteous contempt had grown from an ache to a burn. Each pulse ticked in silence under wooden facades towards some grimly predestined crescendo. With a flaming heart the man had wound his life itself, almost a year's worth, into a tight coil, into a small volatile box buried in the heart of some stage heavy with imperial conceit, tied one last ticking watch onto the whole thing and vanished.

The world-clock must have skipped half a heartbeat. The coil had been perfectly precise, a clot in the artery of the old world, a fatal blow- what sweet mercy it might have brought. The rest of the universe was half an hour off from that most perfect device, crafted in rage and pain, a tick of the weather like a second hand stuck on one gear strumming into the same place stroke after stroke, with every vibration of the little clock soul drifting from the whole assemblage of the world, until the artery of time and place burst- too late now- in a minor vein in some giant hand of the state, bursting without meaning. Could the universal clockmaker have intended the hunger and fire and blood and death that followed? Why had he let the world slide off kilter from that perfectly crafted weapon? Was it truly His foot which had slid to stop that bomb? His breast leadened lower with each thought that brought it to him- round after round of life.

As the gears on the iron horse stampeded across their steel landscape, his veiled feelings cast their mournful calls into the fog-bound sky, carried on the hot air rising from match-flame. Were such martyrs, damned once in their lives already, to be as surely kept from heaven as that watchmaker? If the old Roman church had held that in martyrdom their corpses fueled the Church Triumphant, so it was with the nation, his brothers corpses building these great tracks to the hellish frontier, fuelling myths of hilltop cities? With their deaths no more than heating the updrafts above which dark and pagan wings soared so high. What salvation could a Church Militant offer to them below in the bloodsoaked autumn muds? He looked out the window panes stained with rain, staring at a briefly passing cemetery, beautifully granite amidst sopping mud, sinking into hell whose caverns were so vast they might never be filled. In his solitude, he sighed as the pillboxes trundled backwards through the glass frame.

"Goddam you sons of bitches!" a booming klaxon of a voice bellowed out above a heaving stomach. "Goddam you stupid sons of bitches!" The General was sitting surrounded by a sprawl of papers, stained and creased and smoked yellow from the pall of the old fashioned cigars butts that sat smoldering in a crystal dish at his left hand. Jo wondered what his escorts had done to provoke the wrath of the old governor. Then, in a rush of sudden speed a great file of the paper was crumpled and tossed into the huge brick fireplace that framed the bulk of the medal soaked man of sixty six. The sagging flesh around the sunken black eyes twitched up to acknowledge the three slim men, heavy coats with black leather and polished metal buckles. "Ah! Beerbohm-boy, you're here at last! Brunning, Kleff, off! Enjoy the evening. But I'll expect you here for roll." He brusquely waved a huge, flabby, liver spotted hand. Typical.

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However muddy the souls may have been, the bright black leather of his boots shone with each swaggering step his knees took down the carriage, gleaming obsidian hide shattering the dull stone pillars of the station as he almost leapt down to the platform. Back to his element- gray, smooth, formal, machinesque, precise and safe as long as he spoke with discretion, an art as old as his language. The platform was empty and cold, the passing brown furs and leather suit-cases and carpet-bags of the frontier bound detritus swirling away around him. Of course the old man had not bothered to meet him. Instead, empty faced soldiers, garrison stomachs full of beer and canned sauerkraut pressing against the brass bracing of their barreling uniforms were sitting on the desolate wood benches of the station as the dismal winds bore mountain mist down the river town.

As his blacked calf-high boots clipped down the wrought iron stairs, passing the rose and black cabin, one of them looked up, stubbed out a paper cigarette on the bench, and gave a lazy half salute. "Rear Admiral Beerbohm? With us, please." His partner dragged out the last of the burning fumes and spat the ashy butt with a wad of yellowed spit onto the frigid gray platform. Jo nodded- of course the old name stuck around- and gripped his bags with leatherbound hands. Even through the gloves he could feel the cold, almost hear the howl of wolves on the wind. Not even the comfort of decaying brown leaves graced the edges of the city, nothing but hewn rock and pavement, a garrison cold glass, steel, and stone. The only color was the occasional red brick of the old indigenous city underneath the garrisoned order of planning. Here too, the frontier with its dark woods and bandit and red filled underbrush, the wild and savage things that lurked therein, were close enough that the city planners had allowed no vegetation of any kind, it seemed, to flourish.

But outside the grim station, a huge bazaar filled the paved square. Patrols of Indian-scouts, blue kepi hats separating them from the sun-browned faces of the traders and the merchants who barked out behind stands of furs, boxes of gleaming brass ammunition, crates of labless whiskey bottles, tubs of moldering tobacco, tins of coffee and surplus military soup. Bearskin cuffs, wool capes draped in eagle feathers, bangles of brass and mountain gems, all the appeal of the mythical horse-soldiers of the frontier fading into a cool gaze no different from the same that graced every proper soldier garrisoned out here for more than a year, fatigued by the grinding little wars and bandit massacres. Mingling throughout the crowd, faces as pale as the northern snows or as sun-browned as southern rye, young men in pressed suits fresh from the Capital and grizzled traders haggling over prices, women drooping ermine scarves low

and lower as desperate as the stall-owners to entice customers away from competitor. Lost souls or bold entrepreneurs? The difference was thinner than the thin men dressed in black slipping through the cracks in the crowd, checking papers, checking taxed bills, guessing how many drops 'one' might be out here in this yet lawless and fluid land. Past the busy plaza, beyond the impressive red brick and cold steel bridges, rose a dome, like a cloud or a dream of the marble Taj.

Fort August sat only a short distance from the passenger rail, spilling domes and high walls out beyond that wide blue river. Behind mighty whitewashed walls, gargantuan steel guns protruded, guards on the parapet. The sigils of military order floated in the cold gray mists like birds of prey above the chaos of the market, baleful observers behind hollow cyclopean gazes. Like bangles dripping from the wrists of a proud cossack, garish ornaments were hanged from its phallic jutting emplacements, limp and ragged in the November gusts. You could never tell how the madness of the frontier would be expressed in the men who moved it. The gray bodies danced in the faint rain below the guns like possessed dolls.

As they approached the grim gallows outline under the oriental domes, once no doubt a litany of superstitious colors, now uniformly whitewashed, that had accompanied the fort's prehistory huge torches burst into light, turning the glass and meringue whipped macrame highlights into glimmering spirals against the eggshell blue of the rare painted wood facade, light dancing through the fall sky across long translucent panes stained brown with the ghostly reflection of an old red brick Tatar tower, crowned with a gleaming searchlight, cold metal unlit in the gray of a fading fall day. The overwrought structure left standing doubtless only by the grace of an old man's fancy was like something out of a spanish fairytale, a relic of something three worlds ago that had somehow survived several deluges. Between the stiff bird-like strides of his accompaniment, three pairs of polished black leather boots crossed the eternally watched threshold of the fort underneath the dead pendulums which matched the clatter of six boots in the silent fog with the mournful swaying count of gusts from distant mountains.

The dark slate chamber, sunk deep into the heart of the antediluvian fort, was swept with surgical precision, spartan and nude. The theory of the pressed rock streets of the city, none of the cigarette ash or vomit of its reality. Utopia, for the thin gray men- all men this far out- in spectacles or clouds of cigar smoke. A long dark wood table sat in the middle of the sparse room. Already, there were officers, older men with thinning, wolfish hair hunched over it, muttering and cackling in quite conversational couples. The far end was dominated by a single man in black, long pale scar running down his subterranean face. The beast was draining the sound of those around him from the very air, an area of exception in the light party. It was towards a chair near that dark pit that the arm of the general pushed his shoulders towards, and like a yoked oxen towards a charnel pit he strode. He could hear the steel boot heels click across the smoked concrete mirror. The Governor-General heaved himself upright against his massive oaken armchair at the table's root, and briskly snapped his fingers, calling the room to attention away from the black void of the scarred man, like a showman commandeering the stage.

Pale gold beer, thinner and lighter yet than the hard soldiers-frontiersmen who were pouring it, went down fast and all but two of the cups had been emptied and refilled several times as the foggy afternoon in the fort gave way to a foggy dusk. The

tealights and colored lamps that lined the walls stood in starker and starker contrast to the pale light filtering in through the high windows. Now the old man stood up, short going on shorter every year, but still solid as a bull, pausing to quaff his glass, his medals and his dark uniform dazzling the eye under the cacophony of lights,

My comrades in arms, tonight we drink to our fallen blood-brothers who died to secure the blessings of civilization and liberty in this godforsaken land. Under a waning moon forty years ago, towns and farms of our country men from here to the mountains heard a great thunder come from out of the hills to burn and rape. I was only a young little lieutenant then, barely more than a fresh academy peach then, but I could fight for our people, our women. The men above me? Old men who had known peace too long, sat too idle, rested too deeply. Lazy supply captains and the wheedling ferrymen who forgot their duty chasing silver and fur. Around me I saw native born brethren forget their responsibility to their own people of the land, flee “under orders, Sir,” from the red hosts, the savage maw of the frontier. In this dark hour, who stood with me? Who was willing to die in these last pits? Only the men of this Fort, August, walls are older than our country, older than our race even. And who stood with us but the savage trappers here, barbarian yes, but proud foes of these red Apaches as much as anyone here. They stood with me, on these ancient stone forts, painting the white walls red with their blood until the army arrived. Those men, their children, our riders and scouts, bleed too. Remember the role this Vanishing Race played in our fight my friends, and you will be happy of it. But above all else, remember that these savages knew a deeper lesson in their unhappy blood than the idlers who once sat in your very own seats. We watch, eternally, against that unclean element- the eternally criminal element. Watch all night with me; and then watch all your lives without.

This was a strange speech for a General in the last year of his service to give- although the old man certainly had affection for his *indianer* scouts and pony-soldier turn coats, it was surely mad to preach their virtues to an audience of Colonels bound for scattered forts and outposts further beyond. Civil as any man could be, once they saw burning homesteads and broken families they would become like wolves on the hunt, burning a hundredfold in response- or more likely pre-emption- and of course few of the men who found themselves leading out here started very far from a Fenris type. But the people of Fort August had found themselves pushed there and back again by the petty empires of red men no less than a pitiful frontier family, and perhaps they thought to buy themselves life with the scalps of their old enemies. Perhaps, with men like the General, they might believe they had, even if only for a pulse.

The men kept vigil on that night, as soldiers in every fort from snowy Fort Michael down to the baked dry bones of Fort Cottonwood across the southern sea were doing. A memory, a common hardship, commanded by all the old officers who remembered the disasters at the hands of that last noble confederacy of the savages. The leader of the marauding reds, Temokushca sat as a cold marble body, dying in his nude grace half emerged from the giant arch gate of the huge marble dome in the capital, gazing silent at the cold marble heavens. Would a man like that, or his Prophet who preached the old ways of life in common and no “western” hard liquor, find themselves in any heaven more distant than that polished frieze watching as their conquerors marched past every day to the hundred thousand desks of the white sepulcher of civilization?

He was “patrolling” the balcony of one of the blue domed turrets, with a cigarette and half a flask hidden in a leather glove, when the scarred man stepped

through the doorway. Over his shoulder the sunset ember of real tobacco burned the stars from the eastern sky. The fog and clouds were clear now, shredded by the frigid night wind which howled around the tower. The Ram was just charging below the horizon into the darkness of the earthen horizon. The man, whose dark cape suggested some silver oak leaves of a Colonel, spoke with some heavy accent- gaelic Jo guessed- which his name, MacCready, confirmed. It was strange to see a Celt rise so high, but with the Rebs needing to have been whipped down, one might have become an officer. "Ah noticed yer off the drink Admiral," he said, thumbing out his pipe set with a full charge of something smelling not quite like unflavored rustic tobacco weed, and puffing it into a glow, just a little too close and a little too informal. Jo's stomach twisted, like a snake coiling. "On the wagon and off again MacCready, on and off. Out here it's better to keep your wits about you, even in times like these." MacCready shuffled in his boots and dark uniform. "Yew know the auld General prutty well it seems, wha'd'ye think about his speech-making, if yew donne mind my question? Think he wants something back home when his time on the crossroads ends?" It would have been impossible not to mind the question of a man in that uniform, even if it was just a Colonel asking. "The Navy has no policy on any questions of the 'auld' Reds, Colonel, which you doubtless know as well as I. That's a policy for you and the army and the BIA to hash out, and with whatever merchants and farmers in the area say, I don't envy you." he said, toeing the line between indiscretion and rudeness. MacCready softened his voice, staring out at the stars fixed in the slowly turning firmament, and between exhalations thick with the odor of foul weed he murmured "One war was too many oer this damn question Admiral, ah don't reckon there'll be another for some time. But the General here stays fixed in his fort, diustant like a pole star, no matter whit the rest o's do. We don't have th' loux- like the rest of the stars, w'll must keep turnin'n'r course, one hunting th'other" which was followed by a mournful stare at Jo. "Who'd'ya reckon is the canny star chasin yew?"

Coffee and canned watercress kept him going as the horizon blushed first gray then blue. He wasn't as young as he had once been, but decorum and discipline still let him stretch a full night out, even if he could feel his pulse threading unevenly as the coffees and flask-sips wore off. He stretched his leg, away from the hot irons of the mess stoves, and wandered down airily windowed corridors towards the main chamber of the big ornamented building below which they had dined. The place had been gutted by flames at least twice, first when Civilization reached it and later, about forty years now, when the red savages had set it alight during their attempted siege. The windows had been expanded since, filling the alabaster plaster walls with beams of sun which filled the old apse. The whole building sat like a fragile gem or a bird above the concrete basement which sat ready for war. An apt metaphor for the whole nation and race he supposed. The first sun rays against his face always made him feel more human and more awake, the warmth chasing away the phantoms of the night and then men in black with strange accents. He allowed himself to relax on a whitewashed oak bench carved into the wall, and checked his pocket watch, losing himself for a moment in the gentle beat of the gears and the delicate hands slowly caressing the ivory face.

He caught his reflection dozing in the window which the river flowed through, the small naval dock like a pedestal below the fort, underneath a transparent portrait decked out in gold braid, dark suit creases, and black leather. Already, boats were beginning to idle their engines, little waifs of smoke trailing up as ants hurried boxes to and fro. This was not the place of sleepy farm hamlets, or dozing colonels under

palm trees in cork helmets. The place was as high-strung as he was, bustling and disciplined even before seven in the morning. A side effect of the old man's tireless watch. Was that how the old General still saw himself, a tsar, ruling with an iron fist over the unincorporated lawless lands, where the gun governed all? Did he really think he was standing above the petty rivalries and conflicts of the mining interests and the rails, the different services and government agencies and the whistling tea-kettles of scandal that trapeze around after any power they could out here? Was he so fixated on "national interest", on watching the "red horde" that he couldn't see the rot creeping out, borne on the same fetid moral-less wind that was sucking Jo towards the wild mountains and plains?

He must have dozed on the bench for hours, for his neck felt old and stiff when he woke. His first instinct was to clutch his service pistol, his next- glance around- caused him to jump. MacCready was sitting a hair's breadth from him, gazing intently, long pale scar puckered wolfishly under those black eyes. A small glass cup of wine sat in the cup of black glove slung carelessly in a vivid splash against the white seatback. "Ah can see yer finally awache Mister officer" the bastard whispered. "Care for a taste?" Jo felt a cold sweat break the dry crust of sleep down his spine. Through the huge glass panes, an eerie fire danced on the floor and rippled down the hills and over the white walls onto the water. The red of the dying sun soaked into the mountain mist rolling in, but the fort itself was still too warm to explain the chill in his bones. He had to get a grip. "Still on the wagon you old devil." The man nodded, and drained the glass, staining over his ivory teeth. "As yew please." He seemed to suck in on the last syllable, strangling it. Jo straightened his cap, trying to reclaim his shield of dignity. "I'll see you at the dinner, Colonel," tossed up a casual salute, and then turned on a dime trying to seem graceful, not hasty.

Down in the recesses of the earthwork, his little guest barracks-room sat surrounded by the tons of powder held in the stone bowels, the fort within the fort. As he clutched for his medicine bag, fingers starting to tremble from the chill, wet from the fever-sweat that sat waiting to break out, he barely paused to reflect. Only once the short ritual was over did the weight of all the stone work, hollowed out into and under the much older fort, sink in. It held him in its cold comfort, clean and dry and powerful.

It was darker than sin when he rolled off the bed, mouth dry and tongue cracking. He smacked his mouth closed in pain, salty blood soothing his tongue for a moment, no more, when he heard a thunderclap and a polished black missile slammed invisible in the darkness past his nose. "Ah had missed yew at th' mess Josia". Fuck. Another blackout. He strained his chest pushing himself up, finding a cloth pillar pulling his hair with sparks of static. He backed himself out from between MacCready's legs- barely appearing now as a void in the colorless midnight. "Older than I look Colonel. Nodded off after the night shift." Someone clucked disapprovingly above his head. "Ye may be on the wahgon, but yer' off the bed." Jo felt against the wall for a second, then gave up. MacCready surely couldn't see any better in the dark than he could. He bent and reached for his boot-knife, but encountered a stiff arm holding his shoulder up. "Careful their ya git, ye'll only hurt yerself." He steadied Jo. "Yew'll need something in yewr belly for what comes next. Hard hours ahead. If ohnly yew'd not given me th' chance, sitting right next to his glutton's plate. Too easy darling, no one daring even to meet my eye." Jo collapsed back on the bed, the

broguish rambling fading into static as his medicated blood stretched him delicately into the thin army sheet...

In his mind it was a cuckoo bird that woke him. One last day of clear air and sun had passed him by, the crisp rain-scented fall of the past month blotted out by the glacier of frigid moisture rolling towards the big lakes from the mountains. The sun hung naked, no veil of mist to simmer through, red and fat. It was lingering over the river, painting it with lavish impression. The dancing light hid the reality of the mist that the next night would bring, an illusion of warmth around the glass cage above. He turned his head to unwind his sore neck, glancing down one corridor and then another, before hearing the constant tapping that had awoken him, precise footsteps marching down the hallway towards him. "Sir! It's the General, he's-" and the blood in his heart seemed to freeze and burst in his veins even as it thundered across his skull. Not a dream. What had that bastard Colonel done? He jumped, ice in his veins. Act. Act. Act. "Where is he now?" and the men were turning to escort him, saying words he could not hear and would not understand.

All that long sun-soaked day, haunted by the last memory of distant boyhood summer, he sat by the bedside, the blanket over the small body, hints of gray and white streaking through the man's skin, his breaths wordlessly fading. He had keeled organizing adjutants for the winter campaigns. The word was already spreading through the web of signal wires. Bandits and train line offices and veteran's groups and lawmen and mayors, in rings, whispers rippling outward from each post. Every whistle of a train entering or leaving the station was another pebble that sent cascades of information along charged copper lines, words floating through the air. What were they to him? He knew, somewhere, that he needed to stay sharp, to keep paying attention. His hands, his gun, his boots. Move, move, move. He couldn't; like a book in the purging flames, a past part of him was fading out of sight, like a tendril of smoke. Had the little man ever really had any idea of him, or just delusions? What difference. Could he have known all along, kept an image of Jo as hidden as Jo thought he kept himself? Had they ever really communicated or had it all only been misapprehension, a game of two shouting liars across a chasm? Still, still, still, a triple repetition echoing in the walls of his mind.

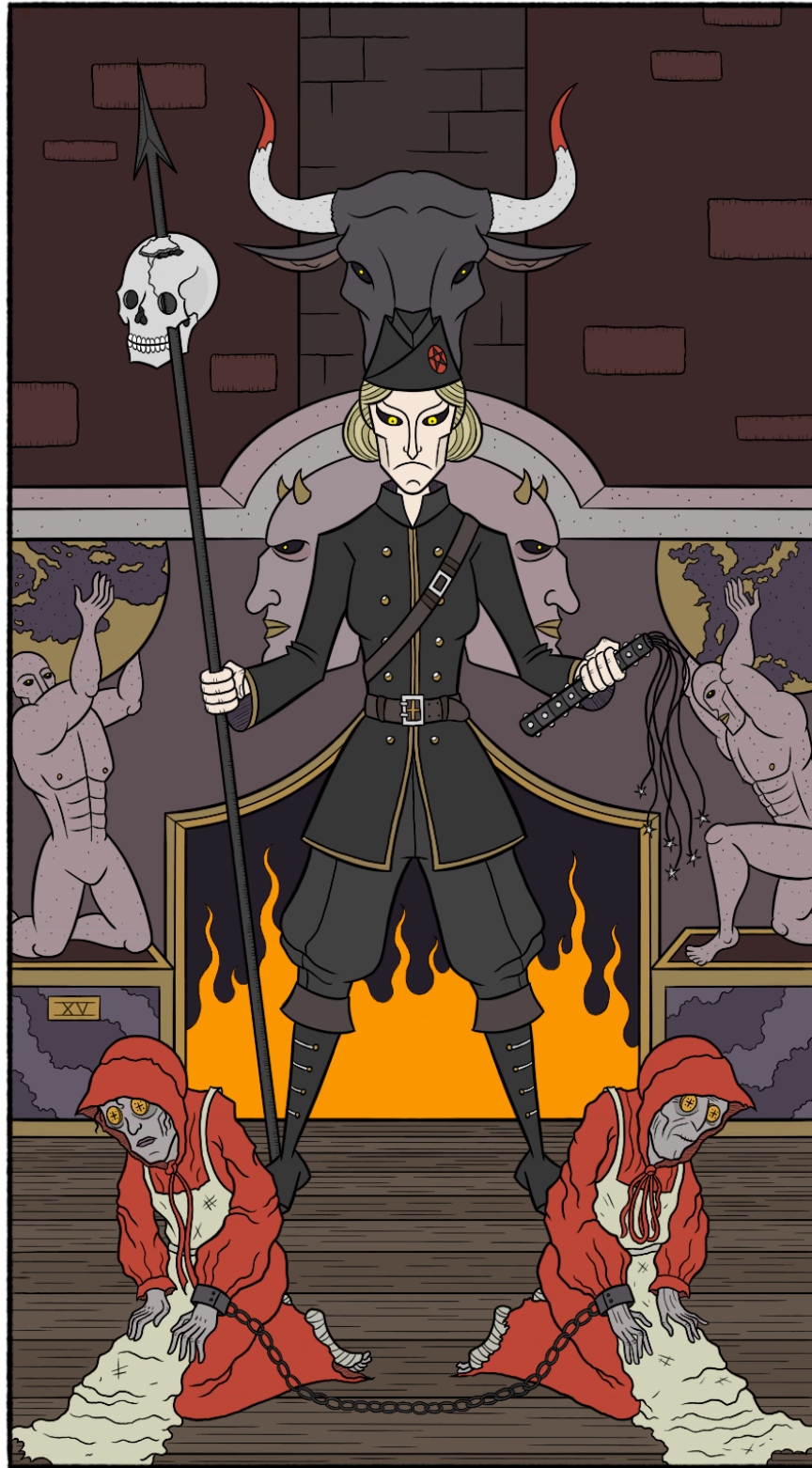
He waited as long as he could at the bedside. Like a dog waiting for his master to wake from the cold sleep, seated in dumb silence. His heart beat sweet nothings of hope, but the ticking of his watch drummed out certain knowledge. Still, still, still-shallow breaths flowed through the little body. He caught tears before they welled out, before they were even half formed. He remembered all the blood and hate he had spent to get here, hate ground thin like a razor to slice the knot in his chest. No mystical relation, companionship of two illusions, people who could never really break through to another, indeed no bond of blood or *piety filial* could ever compare to the law of his God, his personal saving law- the one thing he had, that he had always had, that he would always have. Move, move, move. He stepped out of the private room into the gray of a foggy dawn world. In a frosty haze, he followed the command of the beating mechanical drummer, tick-ticking along without interruption. Making his way down to the dock, feeling cold and metal and out of his own skin he barely noticed the black clad figures moving rapidly around, carrying wooden crates to and fro, swaying in the misty wind in place of the revenants that no longer hung above his head. He turned off at the signal house before he reached the dock. He didn't seem to see the people around him, only the wood bureaus, the ticker paper, the machines and the input

boards. He sent three coded, professional messages- All good moving ahead full speed
STOP

Act. He was already on the boat, mechanical and precise, stowing his bag, folding his sheets, and saluting every man jack, before he realized something was wrong. Act. His hand went to his pistol, and his eyes lept towards the sailors in blue. They weren't in blue, they were all wearing black, thick cut material. Not grease stained. Act, he was moving towards the rail of the boat, towards the shore- MacCready was standing just behind the man at the wheel, turning, caught his shoulder again in that icy grip. Black jacketed men, red cloth streaming around their arms, silver buckles and lapels. Guns and knives everywhere. As he turned around, someone was already pulling his pistol- sheath and belt along with it- away from him. The Irishman's cool smile said all he needed to know. "Mah good Admiral, yewr unease is palpable, but yew can be assure-red that no hahrm is cahmin yewr way. Me and my men ahre simply the best at hand to ensure no banditry or civil strife and bushwackery, or, God forbid, red raiding, pops up in this so tragic time. Yewr in safe hands, even in this hoor of yewr distress." putting a heavy glove on Jo's shoulder he continued "yew'll be mahkin the joorny with us most af th' way, an yew'll get yewr pistol back as needed. Jus' a precahsin"

No need for a tail on him when he had jumped in a pit of snakes just as the net was cut away. None of his bags, no flask, no gun, no way to signal. He needed a drink. There had been Irish volunteer detachments marching all over for both sides, and probably plenty of them engaged in "banditry, civil strife, and bushwackery" too. No formal systematization after the war- just leniency and a simple oath, and a lot of pent up hate from people on both sides of the ground. Who knew what the blackshirts manning the wheel wanted to do to him. There was no way out now though, he'd have to take Colonel MacCready at his word, and hope no one looked into his confiscated briefcase too closely. He made his way back to the cramped opening, and slipped down to the bottom of the hull, where the lead ballast lay. Between the stores of canned food and the cases of cartridges he managed to locate a rare treasure, an emerald pomegranate. Feeling hawkish as his eyes scoped in on it, his great coat rustled on the wood crates as his hand plucked it, slipped it into his deep sleeve, and he turned around hoping the watching man on the stairs was none the wiser to his sleight of hand.

6: Chaeron's Ferry



He stood outside his family's river shack, weathered pine siding sagging against light cast by half-moon's setting glow. Northwards, a star had birthed itself fluorescent and fast growing amidst night-dark skylines. It was a bright white light from behind what passed for a grassy hill in this flat country, shining across river bends in great midnight blue river. Then, beacon-gaze swung, and a roar like something earthbound breaking called out. Below fluorescent starlight, a shadow- a white-washed shadow- crossed. It had orange lights like eyes on its pale face and a scarlet flame, a signal cherry, bulging nose-like above prow. Great jagged tattoos rolled above white froth of its high cheekbones. Third boat this month, and bristling with black silhouettes of fangs. It chewed calm night river water as it roared towards his family's dock. A scarlet beacon- danger. A foghorn- screaming of his grandparent's ghosts. "You should run, son" he could remember older voices saying, last time he had heard a dreadful midnight howl. He thought of his crumbling shack. His mother was ill. His uncle hadn't dropped a bottle for many boats long past. His brother was still missing, taken in chains so long ago. Something in his stomach dropped, and something else started to rise in his chest. He ducked into weathered wooden posts, his small dockside shack, past coloured blankets draping his mother, past table top and half empty bottles where his uncle slept wrapped in a long tangle of hair.

A rifle, some powder, a little lead, brought together in a thin tube of brass, fit together so, so perfectly, elements of a plan sliding into place. Firstly, he would not tolerate, could not tolerate another raid. Not even its threat. His uncle wouldn't act. His mother couldn't act. His brother was gone. Secondly, how could pigs who had streamed east, burning farms and houses, shackling women and killing men, ever learn if they never faced any consequences? He felt terror and determination rising together, acid up his throat. He looked down cold steel, resting on a pier point, lining up notches at both ends. He could see on his boatside a man, a black shadow against night-dark, staring through a tube at that star which still hung overhead illuminating them. He breathed in, held his lungs and squeezed his young and calloused index against hard steel. His thoughts: A blow for liberty, a blow of a resistance, hammer blow ringing out across land, ignition of mighty powder charge from such a small twist of one finger. A blow for death.

The boat was like a beached whale, fat pale belly stuck on the yellow sands of the high riverbank. They had been sheltering from the whipping winds and the icy sleet for days now. It hardly ever got this cold so early. After the little potshot scuffle south of Fredericksburg they had hit a sandbar, where some rock must have broken the majestic steel skin of the hull, and they had been forced to beach here. The cavalry forces in the area were busy galavanting after some bandits or Red Indians or whoever these "Black Johns" and "Wild Wolves" really were. With no kind of real shelter, MacCready had elected to use the beached wreck as a little fort and wait for sweet relief. Jo suspected that the man did not trust the locals- or the navy boats they might have signaled down towards. It had been about a dozen days huddling around a fire pit dug in the sand, sleeping in their bunks under layers of cloth which felt less and less able to keep out the mounting cold. The cans of beans which they heated over the fires every night were not running low, but Jo felt a nervous worry pushing against his lungs. If they were stuck here when the snows came and the troops got bogged down... if they ran out of wood for fuel and food to eat... MacCready, did he really know what he was doing? *This* was the frontier. These supply concerns mounted day by day, rising up his throat like some hot reflux inching its way along his esophagus, to the point where if he used up his carefully rationed flask it might all spill out.

He was out collecting brush and hoping to find a field of ripe corn or potato or turnip, anything but more damn sugary beans, when he heard the cavalry troop

approaching. Like distant thunder on the tough frozen plain, their advance seemed to herald some destructive natural force. The cold wind blew, and his red chaffed hands wormed their way back into his thick coat pockets. He sucked in a lungful of the gray air, not as cold as the North Atlantic in November, but awfully biting. The drumming cacophony of hooves on freshly frozen mud crackled louder and louder across the gleaned landscape. He turned back to the boat and started to jog, lungs aflame. If this was some troop of barbarian cossacks or red indians raiding, his odds were better with the hateful man and his whale-belly of guns.

When the troop arrived at the broken boat, search lantern shattered and bleeding red light out on the jagged dusky river bank like a devil's pyre, they called out from a distance. "Ho there! Permission to enter camp!" in the formal military custom. Playing it up for the professionals. Jo supposed that once upon a time there had been a password system- there still was for naval signaling- but with all the competing army branches, all the petty feuds, everyone angling to stay on as drafts and reliefs came and went, as different hired guns and elected sheriffs and womanly bosses of towns swam through the ever murkier legal system, well... Of course the number of bandits on the high bank had dwindled. The bushwacking and highway robbery and dynamiting of trains had followed them, pushed by the civilizing force of government to the edges of the civilization and that's what the maps showed- the great gleichschaltung of manifest destiny taking place even as the little sinews of society that had made it possible stretched and snapped against the huge frontier, the currents of chaos and monoculture tumbling round and round... lost in this meandering river of thought as he sucked down a decidedly unrationed emergency supply cigarette with mindless pleasure.

Smoke was coating his gums as the dismounted riders entered camp. At their head strode a woman. Her frame, blocked against the darkening clouds by a bear-skin cape, clad all in black, blacker than burned charcoal, blacker than sable and seaborne midnight. Toe to head; polished leather boots so black that they could gleam white; Military pants, black and thick, practical and intimidating; black tunic, black bandolier, black lead bullet heads; up to peaked black cap a diagonal slash in the gray sky. The face, red from the cold wind burning out from white-gold hair, red with a crimson slash at the mouth. Black, white, red. Another no-win situation, given the dark brown gaze that grazed him from between the high cheeks. Perhaps he was wrong- there was something cold and hateful in that glancing blow, which was all the better in every way, something like the burn of that first drink against the back of his throat.

He continued to drain the tar-ember, calming his nerves with the hot poison buzz, taking in the rest of the riders. All black and silver, faces red and white from the riding and the cold, a 40 odd mix of men and women. What a strange sight- here in the most progressive, most civilized and proper country on earth, where women understood their domestic task, where they were protected and kept pure and had simple expectations. Some found it a bitter thought that so many were under the banner of war. But that was it, wasn't it- at the edges, at the frontier, it all fell back, the skin peeled and cracked from the wind of the plains and the mountains, and all the plays and the poetry; the novels, the literary culture of the great old universities was torn to reveal a hundred blood-roses of lifestyle and necessity.

MacCready seemed on edge. The result of the armed women, Jo guessed, but you never knew. An Celt, no matter how reformed or saxon looking, might never be

comfortable around a group like this, especially outside his command. What kind of group was it really? Were they letting women be deputized out here? Were things so bad that a regularized militia or ad hoc posse had conscripted them? Why weren't they minding children, a less restrained man might have asked. Jo, at least, kept his trap shut. A strange country, and a strange time. Maybe droughts. Maybe slave risings. Maybe just a peculiar institution, Amazons riding the steppe. You could ask, but could you trust anything this close to the border to be what it seemed? You might stumble into a civil township to find a lynching in progress, or some cloistered hardline Church community only to find all kinds of unsavory barely literate immigrants washing dishes and hauling ploughs, babbling in their Norwegian or French dialects instead of speaking. What brought these people here, to a land full of savages and slaves? Why come through the big cities, the peaceful civil lifeless life of paperwork and forms and schools, of poets and philosophers into the mad wilderness? Why keep pushing outward into the harsh headwinds? Was it really the land alone?

He was spiraling, burning through cigarette after cigarette, entranced by the dashing horse soldiers, dismounting with jouncing, flaring wings of fur capes and silver badges, the gleaming eagles on each uniform and the strong, trim bodies pressed into each dashing suit. He surreptitiously glanced to his waist pouch as MacCready awkwardly shuffled his underlings around the camp. The riders stood in legion besides their softly whinnying horses in the gathering night frost. No hard herb left to him now. Somehow he had gone through what was supposed to last a week in the snap of a finger and the click of a flint. Fuck. Fuck it. Back on track, focus, focus, focus. MacCready and his men seemed to be similarly disarrayed, so he seized a little initiative. "Ah, hmm, Captain" Jo guessed from the size of the group, not risking a long stare at the silver lapels resting on the pale neck of... it didn't matter. "Captain, as you can see our boat has been damaged and our trek derailed. Hearing about raiding bandits in the area made us hesitant," this drew a hard thin smile from the Captain's red mouth "made us hesitate to leave the boat on foot. If you have some dynamite to help us get rid of the military asset" he jerked a thumb at the hulk, gesticulating wildly to communicate with the country-folk "we'd also appreciate directions to the nearest Fort..." The riders stared at him.

"Colonel, what are you doing taking orders from a fish-sucker like this?" The valkyrie in bear-fur snapped. MacCready looked dumbly ahead, trying to process the moment. "This is Admiral, uh Beerboh-, uh We-, yes Beerbohm, we're escorting him down river to the new naval posting. Given the circumstances. The uh, well, uh, the Governor-General's condition isn't known" The last sentence forced a click of recognition in the few riders listening. "Hmmm. Colonel, you better get your men moving. There have been Komanch who crossed the river a week back south of the canal, and they've been hitting the homesteaders there pretty hard. Lots of bleeding. We're basing out of a big estate, just west- if you walk hard on the road you should make it before the sun rises again. You don't want to chance another night. They might have dynamite by now, you know how those red thieves are. As for the wreck- the river will swallow it." A dismissive hand wave at the gelling floes of the wide water. Those cloaked, violent shoulders shrugged once, turned, and a hand gestured for the other riders to mount up and leave.

They moved fast, rolling up blankets from the bunks, checking ammunition and rifles (Jo checked his bed roll for the pomegranate he had set aside), grabbed a few cans of beans and some boiled water and abandoned the wrecked carcass to its fate.

Let the metal beast rot out the winter and break up into the river tides come spring. Over a few acres of the flat brown grass they pushed until they found a road, hard and frost-blackened, still bearing the metal stamps of the light platoon they had encountered before. His clean boots thanked the cold ground for the weather, mudless, stamp, stamp, stamping down the road in the midst of MacCready's men. "Do you know of that band, Captain?" he asked suddenly in the misting even-dark. MacCready's face, already pinched tight against the wind and drizzle, blinked before pinching even tighter into a closed wall. "I've heard o' th' type. Lots of 'em ot here, wimmen too what when th' manfolk and childern get scalpe' and butcher' by th' reds." "Their uniforms looked very formal, but I've never heard of your... order... taking the fairer sex out to the fields of war." "Ah, th' uniforms. Weel, anyone can buy th' black clothe and silve', but I dinne reckon it's mooe'n a territorial, deputized by some land baron,"

This sounded plausible. The unit had mentioned big raiding, "Red infection" type stuff in the area. If the big houses would pay the little houses and give them guns to beat back at men who burned homes- well, who could turn down money and blood for blood-money? "But I also 'eard th' they ride sout' o' th' rivers, Cossack type werk with th' Mobile units when th'y're busy wit' some Khan on th' plains oer enothe'. Yew never know wet' those sorts. Gray uniformed pricks, no sense aboot 'em. Murdrin idjits n' thieves. Nea' as bad as you blue-coat navy dandes." True, of course. The army- or the generals in the Capitol claiming to be such- had loose formal control with its commanders out here. If they wanted to enforce an order, they'd have to march out and do it themselves. Hard to recall a man at the head of some great armored column burning a swath in the tents and cesspits that festered south of the river bends, or hiding in the great dark forests at the edges of the mountains.

Lost in another stream of thought, he had hardly noticed as dry winter crop-corpses replaced the grasses, long furrows scarring the ground that had been so flat and smooth. He did manage to notice the marble columns, winged by wide panes of glass, white painted stone and carved washed wood erupting like an alien skeleton from the expanse. A long graveled road stretched back towards a cluster of adjoining buildings, some with pimply domed roofs, some with little chimneys, some with small windows of their own forming crescents peeling back from the road. Someone had paid a pretty penny to haul all that rock and timber out here for the plantation. Let alone transporting the glass along these muddy excuses for roads. Such fine things didn't grow on trees- well even trees didn't grow on the sod here, it was some money from the civilized cities back home. Still, the dirt was good, and there was money to be made in the summer, when wind blew through cotton-bolls and indigo dye or corn and rape as the fads of industry and luxury duelled over the good earth. "Weel, I most expect someone to come get thes' gret whoppin' dours fer us." MacCready spat and looked darkly over his shoulder. Sure enough, another feature of the featureless world Jo had missed- six horsemen on brown steeds stood watching, trapped out in their midnight finery. The gray day was well on the way to replacing the bleak night, and the heavy clouds stained until they disappeared against the endless foggy autumn dawn of the country sky. The riders who had been circling behind them in the corn-rows closed in, wind whipping the black manes of the horses and the black capes of the riders in the lights that already flickered through the cavernous windows of the house. The door finally swung open, the wait that had been illusorily lengthened by the creeping dawn ended in the blooming of swept marble floors within.

The malevolent valkyrie stood, still clad in that black and silver, wind-polished face now rose and ivory in the dawn light, black hat and silver grinning skull staring out at them. "Gentlemen and Officers!" with only the hint of biting derision "Come in! Early as you are, we have no meat for you- but some of the slaves will no doubt be kind enough to offer you some boiled turnip left stewing in the kitchens! You can bunk in the second story drawing room." With a spartan austerity that belied the rich cake-white house, glittering with crystal and lights and rich mahogany flooring. They spilled in on their tired feet, tumbling up the painted banisters, past the tastefully refined paintings of fruits and dried bouquets, around a corner and down the little half step into the drawing room, rich with velvet chairs and hanging chandeliers. A surreal escape into civil society for the group, lux far removed from the darkness, the permeating scents of diesel and woodsmoke, and the gripping anxiety of attack which had sunk into their camp in the rusting boat over the past two weeks against the frigid river. As they were unfolding their bedrolls, laying the lice-ridden wool across the well waxed wood. The sudden swinging of doors and the motion of silent linen-wrapped feet was more alarming than an air-raid klaxon.

Rifles sprang into hands, half undressed men with smokeless cigarettes tumbled behind corners and doors, knives appearing in their palms. Half a dozen gun-bolts slammed into place. The slaves of the estate barely blinked, merely carrying on with their silent burden. How beaten must they have been to know to not even express fear at such a band of hairy beasts armed to the teeth, stinking under black marching uniforms? Bury the question, bury, bury, bury. They were all women, so short and thin and pale, more shades than human beings of flesh, hair hidden in threadbare gray bonnets, eyes downcast, too conditioned even to flicker in curiosity. Their drab brown dresses were thick enough to hide what must have been skeletal frames, just warm enough for the strongest to survive unheated winter cabins. Their thin hands were roughly calloused, and eyes turned down as they placed a table and a thick iron cauldron of mashed turnip. How many meals had this "voluntary" contribution cost them? Well, it wasn't canned beans, and for that he could pretend christian gratitude towards this horror spectacle that seemed to register even less to the aloof gazes of MacCready's men then it did in the eyes of the living dead.

A month or three quarters of a moon since the harvest, but the howling winds and the cold sweating mist said that this was already a hard month. Somewhere behind the clouds, the last glimmer of the morning star must have gleamed. Below and beyond the glass portals, the freezing lightless serving cabins stretched in a pale crescent against the dark steppe, finding no repose from the icy breath of clouded heavens. Inside the big house, the wood floor was hard but reassuring against his back, at first at least, until the ache where it pressed when his hammocks and pillows would have retreated, sank into his march-weary bone. He tossed and turned, stolen root-pulp burning a sinful pit in his acid stomach, but the big house was warm, the soft gray of the clouds simmering against the thick window panes, and his blankets familiarly clinging if none too fresh. The full flask of whiskey he figured he didn't need to ration anymore helped numb the hell-fear too, at least until the last draught was drained, and the ghouls began to stalk his half-sleep again. Drinking stretched the minutes into hours and smashed the hours into minutes, just like sleeping; put them together, and drifting off and on consumed half the short and dim day.

The sun, the sun, what a glorious light! The flat lands lounged out, scars casting black shadows of order stretching East towards dusk, where at last the ever

present gray had broken into streaking splinters of fluffy white, delicately gilded by the late evening sun. The same slaves, hiding fatigued eyes behind downcast lids and stiff gap-toothed obeisances brought a steaming kettle of something approximating coffee along with oranges and cuts of sweetbread graced with thick scoops of butter. Minutes later, alerted by the departure of the slaves no doubt, some of the riders tramped in.

The first man to stride through had a thick red swell on his face like he'd been hit by a riding crop, his face trying to hide the injury by adopting a handsome beetroot, followed by the indomitable appearance of their Captain, silver and black, black and silver, from stud handled whip to triangular peak of the cap, and then an assortment of rough-riding men and women, cheekbones, hairs, beards, scars variegating them a hair more than the uniformity of the new blood on the trains, but otherwise the pastiche cut-outs of settlers he expected to see. He was halfway into a second cup of the burnt tasting coffee, hot and strong enough to make him ignore the paste-brown color and bitter taste when sharp words informed him, and the other men, some midsip, that it was roast chicory and soma not the real stuff. He almost spat it out, but the soma would do him even better. Apparently the plantation owner cared not one whit for imports and grew the weed along irrigation ditches. Where had the oranges come from then? A glasshouse out here? A mansion fit for a king then.

He downed the black drink regardless- energy and warmth were warmth and energy, whatever the chemical specifics. He also learned, under the weight of comically crisp pronouncements delivered in a forced, urbane accent that trailed from slightly pouting lips of the Capitan, that the proprietor of the cheesecake castle, which they were blessed by the Gods to be in, had retired to a property south of some other river bend when the raiding began, safe in consecrated state territory, and paid handsomely in kind and cash for the defense of all the property to the local group of 50 odd bloodlusting, revenge-seeking swashbuckling, jayhawking, bushwacking desperados. Barely worth developing into a report for the desk of the southern post, but all the same, he committed the details to memory by persistent repetition. Information was power, at least for the all-powerful, afterall.

Even thinking about the world of machinations drove him near to tears. He decided, more vacation remained him. Still a month to go before that orphean journey resumed, and he might as well enjoy a day of decompression from the depths of sober time spent in the whale-belly he had only so recently departed. Yet- MacCready had volunteered his men for patrols after settling in, fresh for a night-time manhunt. He was no rider, but Jo had offered, in the spirit of noble leadership, to command the night watch from the mansion. He was still fresh from the day's haze of sleep, and the night was good for lurking and soaking in the little details of this strange place. Investigation, business, hard work- and only after that a good drunk.

He strode the wings of the mansion, twice as fine in the purpling sorbet of eastern crepuscule, as the mist drenched fort he had left his man to die in. The walk pumped mormon tea through his veins anew, passing the chessboard of blood red and black patches cast by a fading westward sun. The window-lit hallways, somehow wider than Versailles- if less ornately baroque- but so empty and silent seemed haunted by the absence of oils strewn with smirking Apollo and his court of fawning cupids. Well, the red-velvet of the moving farm chattel made up in opulent horror for the primly refined taste of the absent owner. So different from the little hillbilly communes of freemen, so similar to the great palaces of the old world, the old cities and demons, of the dear Governor-General and the house under the linden lined streets back home.

E-phed-rine, Eph-eder-ine, sweet ephedrine, like a casual lover substituted for an achingly absent old romance. He clutched his hands, nails biting into thin flesh. He had borne the shakes of whiskey-rationing during his time playing at Jonah. God would see him through any coming storm- he must not allow any doubt, Praise His Name. If he kept rationing his drug tablets and swigs of drink, he could keep the worst of the tremors and terrors at bay until he found a pharmacist, a bean grinder, and a stillerman parading around the counters of some frontier general store off an eponymous enumerated Main Street.

He exhaled a long breath. Spiraling, pacing the empty hallways, what could he hope to find? Intelligence came from the living, without them not even the hungry spirits could speak. Maybe time to inhale some hot nicotine, suckle more tea, but look here: his mouth already full of a glimmering plug, ready to suckle the steamy vapor. He paused, blood rushing to his head again, and gazed down from a window, like a solitary specter. Outside, in the last minutes of unfrozen wind and dim prismatic light over the horizon, the starving women were hurriedly churning steaming horseshit in cold iron tubs. Upstairs, the boys not on patrol were fucking around, preening over the local women even as they mocked their armed, masculine state. Across the plains the patrol was moving slowly into the vanishing purple East, too cold for the hot frenzy of a wild hunt in the summer, grimly dutiful and ready for blood nonetheless. Out here, one had to adapt or die. That was the point, Jo thought. He kept himself busy adapting to the warm air from the pipes behind the thick walls.

The vastness of the empty night sky, struck only by streaking comets, hung over him, the hard judgment of stars gazing in silent opprobrium at him. In his relaxed seat by the warm air, he watched as the little dung filled stoves coughed up lungfuls of smoke from the bone-thin slave cabins below. Jupiter was rising opposite the bisected moon, which hung pale in the dying light above Fomalhaut. He shook himself, from warm slumber only as the vent blasted its last, and rattling, shut off. The cold drove him towards duty, or at least out of his seat, finding an as-yet unsurveyed set of calcified stairs leading down. Wise to the treasures one could find buried, the chance of coaling up the furnace, and of course eternally faithful towards his sworn duty to locate interlocutors, he descended into the shaded cellar world of mildew and gelled earth.

In a world like this, why not? Hot rough drink down the throat in one long pull, in two long pulls, let the oak casks spin in front of him. How many caskets ought to be here instead for burials? Did they mix the slaves and the militia together in the fertilizer rot for the soma-fields, or did they just let you lie in the fields, a ripe green sprout of energy springing up where a cross might have stayed in the gelled soil. Wolves or wildflowers- in the end, we all wind up eaten, he thought. How long had he been down here under the old oil lamp, drinking, drinking this wood rot...

His head spun as he fell, and the dingy lamp glinting against a coal bunk caught his eye, and nausea flooded up him, accompanying memories of the first body he'd disposed of. He had been twenty, maybe, Civil War still flickering around in fires and gutted buildings and bloating bodies on cobble streets. When the old man had snapped, told them to get the execution rolls, knock off every one of them, damn their rights of blood or birth- well they had. The man- the fish he still tried to tell himself- he'd caught was in a coal bunk like that, black sack over his head, banging and screaming. How cold Jo had made himself feel, pulling the polished rolling steel pistol out, steeling his quavering body, "Any last requests pig?". It was right, of course, to

ask. But all these years later- maybe it really was one turn of phrase that had set him alight, kept him sleepless and haunted by guilt for nearly three decades. Would he ask it again? Only in his strongest moments could he answer.

“Let me see Georgia again. Let me die in the shade of the vines, let me blood go to the good ground there.” Jo had noisily cocked the heavy hammer, almost screaming, this is it! The message must have gone across. The fish squirmed, pissed itself noisily against the metal coal bunker. “Look me in my eyes and tell me you’ll lay my body there at least.” He had pulled open the door to the bunker, hesitated, gun growing heavy, time seemed to break down. Of its own accord, his free hand pulled back the rough black cloth, and the large brown eyes staring back out-

To this day he didn’t know if he had said anything out loud. He thought so, wanted to think so, wanted to think he’d been convincing. Either way, they’d burned that house down over it, and let the ashes lie. It was probably some dust below a cornershop now, certainly not the fields of Georgia. Two years to the day, he’d woken up screaming for the first time, eyes open to the hell he had built- and then kept building.

He pulled again and again. Collapsed against the barrels, rolling, flopping like a fish, fuck. His hand fell into a puddle of foul smelling sick on the side of one. So much brown hard drink sitting here. What was one day off, on vacation after all?

He staggered up, maybe an hour later. Praise His Name. His heart was pummeling against his ribs. Fuck, fuck, fuck. No need to think about this. More boiled turnips, a hot pork sausage on the side this time, a little hot chicory and ephedra, almost back to normal. He pulled off his shirt, stripped away the filthy undergarment, used it to swab the scene, stashed the empty bottles in a corner, still drunk, still enough whiskey in him to slosh out his boots, but he was moving, he was burning. This was what it was like to live. After ten minutes of frantic cleaning, his rush wore off, and only grit kept him going. After twenty, he felt it was plausible. Time to sleep.

He woke up in his bedroll, having managed to stumble back to it (he guessed a little shakily) and stretched his pained back. The light behind the thick and sallow drapes was a dull gray befitting the throbbing of his head. Half-light like this was misleading to the senses. It might have been high noon outside, but the sleeping returned patrolmen clued him that it was still early. Indeed, a glance at his dying pocketwatch confirmed an early hour. He pushed himself up by his elbows, head still spinning, nausea pushing him down, but still he rolled forward onto his feet, erecting himself amidst the sleeping host. His thin undershirt wasn’t up to muster, hanging damp to his corpse in a paint of fever-sweat. His tunic reeked of bile and needed a good wash before he wanted the collar anywhere near him. The smell alone might make him spew again, leaving aside the pressure inside. That slow pounding beat in his head didn’t vanish, but it didn’t overwhelm him either.

Hangover aside, he eased his way out of the room into the long hallway, careful, don’t hit those ornate vases, and then into the washroom. Water basin, harsh cold water, not even warmed by the early rising servants yet cascading ice into every crevasse of his face like the North Sea’s spray. From the corners of his eyes, up into his sinuses, through his mouth, over his slowly growing beard pain and cleanliness rose in common. Ah! So frigid. As he filled the basin with the gunk and debris from the sinful debacle of his past misdeeds, he couldn’t help but marvel. What a world, that he could act up like that and face such little consequence! Sure, in a host of little black

notebooks stretching from here back to the marble dome of the mausoleic capitol, notes would be made by his name, a hundred insurance officers would tick up increases and fines and little additions and subtractions, warrant officers and spies and monitors would note “predilection for drunken debauchery continues” but he had made it so far! An Admiral! Who could truly touch him!

He wiped his flushed face with a rough towel cloth, water numbing the throbbing pain. One of the gray women came in, yoked to two large buckets of water, one cold one recently brought to boil. She never even attempted eye contact. He nodded delicately, ignorant of her notice, and made an exit. What could he do? Some of the holdings would build little churches for the slaves, sometimes ornate and full of baubles and domes and glittering paint, red and white and blue to titillate the national characters; others austere, cold wood with the dead cross hung at the altar. All meant to civilize, to pacify, no doubt. Here there was none- why bother titillating or civilizing a squirrel or a rat, treat as human a mean beast that wouldn't live five years?

What could he do? He returned to the bed roll and grabbed his soiled tunic and coat, his spare leggings and underclothes, and went back to the basins to scrub them clean with the new hot water, maybe shave and polish the marble edges of his face. Keep up the pretense of civilization even now, even here in this lowest hell. Like a ghost, the silent women passed back by the portal, empty pails hanging from the yoke. Maybe it was paranoid to think that anyone cared about a military man who drank, hardly a shortage of those. Why bother looking into the basement of a big house? Lots of stuff happened there, worse and more titillating than a bout of alcohol abuse, and how little of that ever came out? But, there was surveillance, and there was surveillance, and sure enough one of the riders, a forking orange beard erupting from his neck like some bizarre exotic scarf, carrying a platter of rotten berries and a crystal glass of what wine went to wake himself with dog-hair and violent delight. Generous hosts, and for what reason? Did they think they could ingratiate themselves to him? Or was it payment for the hunting, in kind for services of pacification rendered. “The Captain offers you something for revival and invites you to join us for some perk-up in the orange hall.” the devil in ginger murmured to the vomit filled basin. Having deposited his silver tray of delicacies on a cabinet ostensibly for Jo's personal revival- or return to hell- whirled around to flash that black cloak and clacked back down the stairs with his silver spurs jingling. The fruit, soft-looking as it was, smelled sweet, almost like apples baked in cinnamon and cane. It tasted that way, too, and the sweetness and slight tang helped it slide into his churning stomach and stayed gently there. The wine, yeasty and unclarified, some rustic bumpkin's drink, didn't taste like red grapes, but more like some posh fruity blend. Still- hair of a dog, or dog's hair, what difference was it to him?

He left the tray on the cabinet, less because he wanted one of the servers to get it, more because he had no idea what to do with it, and then descended to the grand old main foyer of the big place.

They swerve, guzzling the so-called coffee from chintzy chinaware, porcelain and pink floral swirls stained by hot brown liquid. Amidst the beasts, one of the servants pulled a chair out from the long table for him, brought him a steaming cup. To his immediate left sat that devil of a woman, an aura of malevolence bleeding into his hungover mind. She was in the middle of pointing out some locations on a psychedelic map, continuing on pushing colored arrows and figurines even while he downed a third cup of the endlessly flowing soma. The brown chicory sludge built up

layer by layer in his cup as the slaves danced around the grimly pulsating war board. Almost snakelike, she swerved her gaze and fixed him in her cold brown eyes, almost enough to make him quail, silly as it was for an Admiral who had seen the frontier from its arctic blasts to the diamond desert sands to fear such a little fascist insect.

Their serpentine gazes locked for a moment. Could she see into his cowardly traitor's heart, could she distinguish his hateful and I'll contempt from the garden variety mix of misogyny and elitism she ought to expect? The sight of those pale cheeks... what was it that the bone doctors liked to say about them? Could you really tell a person's character by rolling rosy hills or severe glacier cliffs below such burning, questing eyes? A spurt of realization: she looked more ready to get mixed into the drab serving slaves, more fit to be wearing a yoke, than to be riding with the round flat saxon faces of the riders. Of course- well, you never really knew. Science wasn't everything it was made to seem these days, fancy pronunciamientos on organisms and biology and little fabrications meant to flatter and secure whoever was authoring their arcane truths. Not that that race shit meant anything, especially out in these more fluid melange of the frontier. Action and duty sifted out reality from any predictions of phrenology or biology, social status far more determining than any elementary biological particles. She was tall too- lots of milk during childhood, no doubt, no question about that then. What did the riders whisper? "Well, Commodore, thank you for joining us." Too cordial. Those eyes judged and condemned.

MacCready's ominous arrival to his right was almost a relief. He appeared ghoulish from his night of wild hunts, slipping his handgun out on the table, gutting it like a fish, and anointing the killing steel with benzene and aromatic oils. His casual disdain belied the twitches of his eyes below his fading hairline... always inquiring with a tilt of the ears at the conversations of the local outfit. There was value there, to be sure, but the sociology of little folk has slipped below Jo's radar long ago, and the locus of power- what did that internal bitch want- was the only target of his search. He might be able to get MacCready off his back, maybe even more, if he could bring her to the table... but they already were there.

He filtered out the braggadocious stories of women conquered and tents burned on the hunt for the barbarians the night before, and looked for the ripples of conversation, voids of knowledge they needed filled. Evidently, they were looking for input on the weather conditions. Given the late fluctuations, multiple Indian Summers followed by cold snaps, local expertise wasn't what it had been. The timing of the freeze was vital out here, giving a couple of weeks when maroons, reds, even rogue blacks might cross the riverine frontier and pillage before the Navy barges would break the ice and re-establish a limit of civilization.

"After all, it was on an early freeze around this time a decade back that Crazy Black John crossed the river, took my mother, left my father gutted and hanging from the smoldering house. While the navy patrol boats sat stuck and frozen at their piers." There was always some deep set personal enmity carrying water for the project of his people. Was that all it ever was? "Well, the cold snap now, the weather reports accounting for that, hmm, I think the Admiralty isn't expecting a solid freeze until some of the North-Easterly gusts really take off in January. A hazardous guess. It will be two more weeks before the barges break the ice up to here. Longer if I'm not there to direct them." As if he could give anything else, as if he could fulfill the demands placed on him by them let alone by his God.

But he liked that, the security of failure, the pain of stupid martyrdom, and that was what kept him above the cold glance that searched for fear. Twist the knife in himself, remain cold as the frozen blood on the riverbanks. After a second, a curt nod. "Can't expect anything else from a fish sucker like you" but now the insult sounded bitterly impotent, tugged at his heart all the more for that. "Hey you dumb shit, my cup has been empty for minutes" the forked orange bear yelled gesturing at a one eyed server who had paused to stare at the floor instead of at the cups on the table. The Captain looked up at this. The silver studded butt of the whip flew into the air, caught in a fist of black leather, and then it started to impact that downcast face. "You stupid whores! You think because your Big Uncle fancy philosophy doctor isn't here you can slack off! You think that you can treat us, keeping you safe from the bandits and reds, you think that you can treat us like second class people because we don't have pillars on our houses! What do you think we're not so different from you?" Words of hot venom, punctuated by big smacks of the corded handle of metal and hide, bruising and bursting the skin, shattering fragile teeth, spattering blood, viscera from a disintegrating nose, would no one do anything, oh my God my God, but Jo stayed fixed in his chair like a good guest, like a good soldier, following etiquette. His very presence, his elitism and urban origin indicting him and inciting her to dominate and preserve her status.

When the flurry of blood slowed, and the rising crop snapped back to the chair leg, the other servers dragged away the still breathing corpse, and returned bearing buckets and rags, scrubbed the brown floors clean of the dark blood. The Captain, cold and cruel, spite and rage burning from the edges of the eyes, stood, not panting, not trembling, just passively emanating that energy, a conduit to another realm.

Once MacCready was up and about, gun clean, ever zen, mobilizing those men of his for a patrol, Jo let him know that having discovered a signal wire installed on the house and luxuriantly available, he'd be busy sending messages out to confirm timetables and departmental itineraries with his bosses, convey all the confidential plans the various naval boards would need to know. He knew that saying that would inspire one slave to tap the wires for MacCready- and doubtless, another to stalk that one for the Captain. The house still, the slaves busy processing something or other in the chain of buildings, maybe weaving flax or drying ephedra, talking and finding moments of solace in reflexive chatter, he sat down to compose his messages.

The signal room had its boxes of wires and coils, whistles and bells and all, snaking around the edges of a big varnished pine desk. He pulled out his files, started looking them over, but he couldn't concentrate. Surely he could have stopped the beating. He was an Admiral. He held rank. Did he think wallowing in guilt made him better than the others who sat by? Better than the man who incited it? Better than the whip hand that had carried it out? To let each blow fall, know that it would fall, to still his body keep that nervous hate inside, repress repress repress. Thinking this way was worse than the worst paranoid attack. The cause must continue. The Cause would continue, an invisible thread of inevitable fate, given to him- well "by God" he would say, pretend humility and weakness like a meek lamb. The Cause. His cause. It had weathered so many more indignities and crimes, it had stood by as families were gutted, violated, broken up, crimes worse than a beating happened. It would stand by, like a spring waiting for that sure trigger pull. It would persevere. Still- he had been there. He had dined on that poor woman's food. He had used her services. Whose guest, in the end, was he really. Guns and whips gave one answer, hearts gave

another. Uncomfortable at the sacral image of a flaming heart, at painful martyrdom that was an illusion and excuse for vanity and self-lust... the soma made his nerves jump and spiral into this solipsistic pit for minutes which bleed as hours. The infusion of a little nicotine rich air, steaming into his mouth, soothed them. He had work to do, he could do, he would do.

Halfway through he had found himself on the verge of another diverting dive, spiral of doubt and questioning. The flask at his hip, the rich brandy inside, dimming the brain, making it focus on the page in front of his eyes, on the words that he willed into being, well- it got him across the finish line, edges and splinters and all. It stayed with him after the finish line too. Cold shivers, doubts, the spinning world. Getting drunk again. No fun, none at all, just the waves of doubt and fear, the desperate longing for The Cause, that great overpowering destiny, the uncuttable thread of fate at the edge of the loom. It was no good being drunk, no good at all, but it was something different from the agony of sobriety. Caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. Hold up. The first flask empty, the sky dark, dark, dark, and yet no one was back, the big house so cold and so quiet. What bushwacking was going on out there? Visions of torches in the night, the pine and marble and glass of the house walls blistering and burning, men draped in furs and feathers dancing and chanting to the rhythm of taught skin drums under the silver sliver of a moon. Wouldn't that be some kind of fitting justice, if his part in The Cause ended with a swift sentence here? But he knew it wouldn't, that he was too pivotal, that The Lord God his Savior would pull something out of a hat. Second flask, unscrew the cap, fill his gullet.

Thanks to the cold soma left in the pewter pots around the table he was able to stay alert deep into the night. At some point his screaming stomach made it clear that too much was too much, so he focused on the brewed herb and left the flask alone. He'd have to get clean- but that's what tomorrow was for. Everyday had a new tomorrow after all. The moon had sunk below the mutilated sod horizon and the sky was slowly filling with midnight clouds when the militant drum beat of steel hooves on frozen mud sounded down the road. They were back, but so late! He stepped out with a lantern to see them. In the light, the black riders hailed him with their trophies of victories. Heads, dozens of them, held up by long locks of hair, blood frozen and ruby around the broken jagged necks. A bad night for the reds. They disappeared around the back of the crescent of shacks and re-appeared sans heads and horses. "A great victory! Shame you weren't there fish-sucker! We found another camp, not a sentry in sight and cut them down while they slept!" Were these even the raiders then, or simply some mendicants? Did it really matter? "Let's celebrate! Grab a suckling pig and a spit, it's time for a victory feast! Fetch up a cask of whiskey!" cheers accompanying this donation for services rendered. Good leadership even at this late hour. Little wonder the band let itself be led by this tiger of a frontierswoman. No let himself serve by fetching a cask and hauling it up from the cellar towards the growing flames above.

In due time three white hoglets had been bled and were now crackling, their fat and skin crisping in the smoke and heat of a great fire roaring in the kitchen. Clearly not pampered, the soldiers had done this as well- flush with the success of their victory they were indulging in their independent spirit more than in the luxuries of the commandeered plantation. If the starving servants could sleep more, well- best not mention that to the people carrying bloody sabers. He found MacCready, cut of pork shoulder stuck on his military knife, fat and blood dripping onto that little motto. "MacCready, I got word back from the personnel department. I'm taking a train in the

morning down to the canal, and then barging my way to the docks. Doubt I'll need an escort as long as I make before it ices south of the bend." he said somewhat pointedly. He didn't even (to his ears) sound drunk, a real success. MacCready looked bleakly up at him. "Mmmm. Well, me n' the men'll be riding sout' to a foort ther'boots, so maybe we'll be seeing you yet. Safe travels 'til then" and he turned to one of his squaddies, tipping a chunk of seared meat into the man's icy claws. Jo wondered what it meant, if it was all paranoia, if he wasn't being tracked and watched, if the spiderwebs tangling him were just cobwebs from the dusty basement and fever dreams borne on whiskey shakes. "Fair enough. Good job with the butchery tonight." and they managed to shake hands.

The sky wore a red-brown shirt of low clouds and fire smoke. As if they were hidden from the face of God- as if his veil was raised- they drank and feasted. The charred flesh and salt mixed with flowing liquor in Jo's blood.

At some point someone had roused the slaves, drove the shivering gray figures from the meager shelter of their cabins, and set them to make music. Foreign triangular guitars and rude flutes were whipped to make a merry jig for the black clad rough riders to debauch themselves to. He thought there were- well, God bore witness to what some of the men were doing, but Jo turned his face and stared into the flames. Like a vision, tobacco vapor danced with the orange of the sparks, and he saw what he wanted. The black crop was in his hand, the devil-woman below him, and his arm was tired. Was she crying and protesting or grimly waiting for him to slip off so she could grab his gun? He kept smashing at her face, shattering blood vessels and bones, breaking her long canines into a dark red gummy smile. Was it his place to keep beating her? Had it been his place to sit by before? Air gurgled out from a brutalized grin. The reality vanished in an exhalation and coughing choke of smoke.

All around the firelight and shadows danced like a hundred depraved figures. Soft singing in the background, almost mournful, maybe a Danse macabre for the slain escapees, mixed with the swaying starving ghosts at the edge of the fire. The one eyed crone- the one eyed lady, somehow still a survivor, lead the rasping chorus. He couldn't meet her monocular gaze, fixed through singular treats on the fire. Instead of dwelling on what else she'd survived, he looked elsewhere. He caught the icy hypnotically driven state of the Captain. To lead a pack of wolves like this- to lose her family- she must have been the devil himself. In his shoes, she might well have marched past the plains, to Siberia and Alaska, to hell itself, under the eagle's sigil. He lingered. It was loud and busy. He could well kill her and make a run for it. He could strike a deal, offer parts of himself- documents in his briefcase or a spark of life and respect for some trinket of support if not affection. He hated himself, in that instant, full of temptation and lust and pride, dreams of leading riders like these back to the decadent linden-filled streets of his youth and their resplendent mausoleums. He did what he did best then, pouring a long pull of whiskey, killing all the parts of his soul which yearned to plunge into some hot hell, picturing throwing each emotional urge into a coal bunker, slamming the door, feeling a 10 pound trigger pull and an almighty bang.

He got up, passing MacCready as he staggered towards the big house. "I'll see you in hell, long after I've sent you there fucking jackbooted mick." He tossed out the hate, earnest and ironic, with a charming grin, and left the man standing looking over his shoulder. A sin, but a small one considering all that tore him apart in that moment.

At this hour, Jo figured he would wrap his roll, jacket up, leave with the dawn, and sleep on the train. No risk of sleeping through a departure that way. Planning, still sharp, still there. The liquor could try to kill him, a bargain considering all the bottles he had killed himself, hell- the liquor might kill him, steal that victory from everyone else who might have a claim, but it would have to wait until he got into position and loosed the burning arrow of his life. "God will see to that" he lied as he climbed the stairs for his belongings and towards the long roads still ahead.

7: Sic Mundus



Tall, he sat behind the gleaming bronze face, the white rawhide reins snapped taught, his horses Khweiti and Khrisni pulling onward across the ocean of rippling, ripening green grass. The sun, hanging high in that heavenly dome, was kissing the grass which in turn drank its warm soma deep. The thin wheels, like knives in the green earth-flesh, cut shadow lines across the endless plain, stretching backward to some home, the zero-point, the epicenter of the spinning wheel that launched off to the four quarters. Every year that axel moved out, shifting, mixing with the waves of new people drawn to worship its great spokes, the iron rim, the stout pivot around which sprung the churning might of that great disk which was drawing a new world from the old with every rotation. Behind him, the old man sat, now and lance in hand, guarding the fat bundles of sable they carried with them. What would they get for it in the towns out beyond the wheel? Could they secure pasture-rights? Some rare gem in beaten bronze? Trade for soft flax, salt or glass, hard metal or the finest oils? "Go West young man, Go West! To Green Grass!" The elders had chanted over the heavy sage and cannabis smoke, spilling a fine chalice, intoxicating red liquor and sweet honey and salty blood on the ground. Like a spirit invoked, he had answered the call. How long would it be before the steeds and the chariots of his civilization ran into the far walls of the world, started bounding back and forth, lockboxes of shining gold guarded by men riding shotgun, blood and muscle of man and horse linking settlements and connections between people and places. All because of the awesome speed and power of his plains-throne!

Behind the great tracks the wheels left, leaving the vast free expanse of soaring eagles and broad rivers behind them, the mountains and woods thick with wolves stood. Even there, gaps along ford-roads, paths and burned forests which stayed clear of brush, were like the inviting naivete of foreign woman, God-fathers gorgeous virgin expanse. And behind the wheels, chasing the running fur, great churning sun-on-earth beams of men in bronze and lacquered wood, gazed at with lust and fear by the sod bound corn-pickers. These magic carpets, seat and wing, stretched from his home over their own chthonic dwellings. In the wake of sun-streaked bands, pidgins and children sprang up like grain cast over the side of the tall wheels, mixing the soil in every village which would let them, consuming with burning flame the ones which refused to open for their progress. Woe to those which would refuse to let him spread the gift of change that he in his high mighty wheel brought them. This was his way!

He reached down, grabbed an apple from the rough hemp sack, bit deep. No need to stop, no need to rest for a meal! "On Khweiti! On Khrisni! On West!" All day they rode, and as the sun sank low into the far distant hill line with trees, fat and orange like an exotic apple, the two men, silent riders of the plains, crating the seeds of bloody civilization with them, rode into it, pulled behind the chargers, one white, one black.

To begin was the hard thing. That was the first thought that rolled around his aching mind as he awoke to the long hollow orange rays of a sinking sun pouring over his stack of half-read papers. The second was- well, the empty glass was right there. It had become a ritual at this point, medical really, no choice but to keep the pain away, keep a low buzz on to stay alert and in the zone and not doubling up in sweats and aches. He knew that beginning was the hardest part. It was easy to say "I will begin" to say "Tomorrow is a fresh start!" to say "One last hurrah, then it's smooth sailing!" But to actually begin? The risk of starting only to fail, to have the mind slip from boredom or pain or habit, find half a glass already gulped before awareness hit... the hate and remorse just made forgetting that much easier during the next glass. No, to really begin, not in a vapid announcement, but to launch a campaign against yourself, in conditions of ease and luxury- the body rejected it as suicidal asceticism. The mind rejected it as masochism. What was one glass every now and again, afterall? But it was never just a glass.

He drummed his fingers, letting them dance on the gray plastic of the folding table around the little glass, trying to make them unaware of the half full flask in the seam of his coat. The paper he was reading, on the bandit Meinhoff who had died on the gallows after one failed raid too many, drew his eye. Another tragic young death, titillation for the west, hard boiled reality for the east. They had a teleprogram featuring Andreas the Outlaw and the mad Meinhoff gang running on all the screens back home. To go here, where garrisons had commanders who had fought against the little guerillita... it was something difficult to make sense of.

The train rolled forwards. It was easy to think of it like a rocket, jets of flame propelling it out from the launch pad, heading towards some point plus ultra, further beyond. In physics terms it was more of a wormhole, bending the frontier in towards the cities, pulling the cities out into the frontier, mixing them closer together than they could have been. The latest electronic devices made that distance even less real. The same faces, the same brow lines filled every front car he had ridden on out here, even now as the destination collapsed inwards towards the point departure. Nervous fingers were tugging at the coat buttons, raw instinct against the threat of a storm, the fraying nerves at his temples faking pain. The first crusade that had been made out here- well, not the first, but the one that History would call the First Expedition, an offshoot of the Révolution which had carved the New World, the New Europe, out from this savage wasteland, had tracked south along the winding banks of the river, not so different from the train. Rolling wagon paths, overfilling with horses pulling cannon, horses pulling carts and tents and marching men and trooping families, off to a new horizon- all gone.

But if the people and things were gone, their movement remained. Every ounce of oat in a feedbag was replaced with a shovel of coal, or a diesel injection feeding iron horses, safe behind their boiler steel, armored with rams and guns. No red men with rifles, even bandits with dynamite, would dare attempt the train. Every attempted bushwhacking of a family in their steel tracked prairie schooner was bought with a neat stack of corpses harvested by the big guns, like fireworks for the watchers through train windows. The undulation of the river, the men and animals drawing grain along the fertile banks was replaced with the hard angular lines of track that encountered no rational opposition in the flat land, linking town after town as the crow flew, never mind the rivers course or the countries of the hills.

Hills, hills, and more hills sluggishly fell behind, victims of the sluggish pace such an armored charger as the frontier-express. No, not the excitement or heat of burning alcohol and hydrogen in a rocket- just the fight against burning alcohol to condense further the crossing from Station A to Station D. Well, the task was to begin. He let the glass rise to his lips and turned back to the dossiers.

The barren fields of stubble, freshly darkened with liquid manure and frost-blackened gleamed as the sun sank below the bleak winter landscape. The two long whistles announced that the train was stopping, pulling off into the little station yard and ceding the night to the frantic rush of freight, cattle cars of warm bodies one way, cans of meat the other. Along the tracks, the future rose, huge stainless pipelines, thick angular streaks of black ink on the economics map, draining oil, chilled milk, and liquified gas from the wild, pouring it by the ten thousand gallon unit back into the mouth of the heartland, where Thor himself could not have matched the guzzling appetite of industry and household consumption.

He caught himself again, this time a hand innocuously making sure his pockets were still full, idly tracing the flask against his heart. He needed something to pull himself out of this ridiculous spiral. No time like the present, right? And afterall, he had a couple days of trains and towns to go before his big appointment began. No problem- if it got too bad, he knew he'd have to cave for health reasons, but no reason not to start the offensive in this lull of a lifetime. Well, no reason, except the lack of anything else to do. He couldn't stomach pouring over the maps again. He doubted that there was a piece of media in the world that he could comfortably enjoy without hateful pangs darkening the skies faster than the sunset in the misting fields. All of it was shit, hateful, spiteful shit, designed for people who didn't see what he saw, who knew they didn't see it either, who thought no further than two or three whistleblowers pointing at slightly soft apples, couldn't smell the chlorine and burnt fat that drifted westward during the winter storms, binding into the snow, trace chemicals and heavy metals and thumbprints of DNA. Too dark. But he had to stop, he had to try and make himself just a little brighter. He had submitted, so he claimed, to a higher power which demanded a little more than mere compliance. He looked west, towards home, seeing the sun which was out of his sight still bathing distant fields in warmth and favor. Out in this thickening frost, he couldn't merely think- he had to move.

Stillness replaced the throb and hum of the steel on steel action of the train. The station had arrived at the train, and at the same time they had arrived there. It was a little town, which in the half dusk could have been Lindendorf or Ludendorff, his sagging eyes and nagging headache obscuring the meaning a second glance would have given the signs. Like most mid-sized towns along this arterial river, the houses were a mix of the yellow brick baked in The City filled with either old thick boards of whitewashed pine or thin new slices of oak. Unlike many of the new towns, a medieval castle, dark imposing stone, towered above it. Down below, the gas lights of the town were flaring up, automatic flints striking according to the intricate clockwork designs that only an overengineered fringe could permit. The bright white flames shone on dark green roofs, white and yellow plaster walls, and the odd rich curtain of silk brocade amidst threadbare multicolor poly.

Broken tarmac laid under the frozen mosaic of mud, keeping the streets firm enough for his boots to crisply clatter against. This dawning night was clear, full of stars kept afloat in the dark ocean, not yet drowned out by the torches of civilization, only smudged by the southern cosmopolis south down the river. Tonight against the quaint comfort of recognizable civil life they twinkled alone in silence, not even echoing bourgeois murmurs of families from behind closed shades. He enjoyed the silent sky, wandering about the picturesquely quotidian places. No low roar of heaven-bound engines or red-green wingtip beacons flashed as passing objects in the sky. Only the still stars hovered above him, distant and tranquil. As a child, of course, in the days of teleprograms called "Thor's Hammer" and "Wotan's Lance," the crashing sound of jets had seared the skies day and night, hordes of airborne behemoths, heavy with death, a host of metallic valkyries bound for the untamed frontier, to break that violent "Indian territory".

In recent decades, they heavy roars of the darkness beyond the red-brown city clouds had been replaced by quiet purrs of flight: surveillance, commerce, and cordial travel- from as far as the Pacific Rim, strange lights dancing over the Arctic, black shadows crossing moonlit desert sands- and all as fast as hell bats and eerily lit like the eyes of

owls and cats at night. Even now, like some repressed memory of the glory and terror of thundering childhood romances, odd sonic booms resonated like the clash of medieval arms across broad plains from pre-dawn to late night. But here, in this small quiet place just on the edge of the bloody tumor of the frontier, absent the artificial sight and sound of a near airport, the stars alone stole his breath with their alien glamor, unmarred by his people's noisy death-machines. It was, at last, an utterly alien emptiness, exotic and untouched in its vast expanse, and he shivered at the cold beauty untainted by the contempt of familiarity. The Pleiades were climbing out of the east like a glistening ringlet of sapphire, and he thought of Ilona, of a half-dozen women, of his mother...

As his eyes drifted around the heavenly vault, the dark shade of the castle kept flitting between him and the stars, like a mirage or a nightmare. It was fringed with bare-boned trees, skeletal limbs dangling off its rough hewn exterior, shivering the calm night-chill with frisson of terror, Images of pale trees dancing around the black walls haunted his eyes even as he entered a tiny corner-bound coffee-house and sat. He let the warm wine-rich steam from a cup of gluhwein washing his tired eyes. Curiosity kept coming to rest on that hard kernel of a castle which sat like a tumor on the wild sky. Half-glancing over at the woman working the counter he asked in a frost-cracked voice, maybe to her, maybe to no-one in particular, "Does someone still live in that musty old castle... or?" The coffee-woman who he had not really addressed scoffed loudly. "That's old von Waldmueller's place. He's probably old enough to remember fighting red Temu-Kosho- and batty enough to think he's still out there too." She turned around, glancing with hazel eyes under a wide brimmed felt cap. "He thinks he can send his slavs in here to get service, as if they were as good as you and I." This nipped at Jo's attention. "Does he speak to anyone?" "No, no- he's far too good for that, far above us in his great drafty imitation castle. Must've cost a pretty penny to haul granite from the front range all the way here, but you know officers," she paused as if noticing the braid on his cap and shoulders, "well- some officers, anyway. Enough money from their plantations that they can be as mad as they please." Jo chuckled, "Don't worry ma'am, money like that isn't rolling through my pockets these days," although, it was certainly more than people made in a town like this- "but we're all still mad enough to do as we please." He picked up his hat and briefcase, paid and tipped heavily, and asked for directions to her chagrin. He could probably make the castle and hope for a gentleman's honor to provide a bed for a fellow officer before it got really dark.

"Most of the roads this close to the frontier were still more-or-less the hard dirt that they had been 80 years back when civilization had first stepped forth onto this part of the world, probably though the same thousand years of road that carried Aryan chariots East." This was how von Waldmueller's butler, Simon Themosanch, introduced the place. The antique slave grimly gestured with a torch behind heavy iron barred doors, pointing out artifacts from the old country and bullet scars from the new. It was a replica of an old family castle, built on what passed for a hill out here. The towering fifteen-foot walls of stone and pressed wood were more pretentious but still felt more solid than the poured slabs and sandbags of the big forts. Of course, by the train station, the roads were paved with tarmac to help the farm trucks get their produce to market faster in the rainy fall, but hey- it was a free bed. Semyon announced, rather too formally, that the Graf von Waldmueller "was yet abed and

likely thus to remain for some time” but that an officer like him would be well seen to later. He offered what remained of a sausage stew with white bread, and then showed him to a room on a high tower. Unlike actual medieval castles, there was no donjon, just the thick outerwall, with wood and yellow brick buildings standing along it. The tower however, was clearly a thing of luxury as the windows were not oil paper or sustained plastic, but instead real crystal glass, and the bed was downy and covered in delicious soft sheets which the manjack claimed were pure “steppe linen.” Well, they would get no complaint from him.

Morning sunlight danced through the clear crystal panes revealing snow dusted fields of dry heather. Jo stretched out his back and rolled his stiff shoulders, a night of sober sleep in a comfortable bed having done him a world of restoration. A knock on the door and a message from some slav-tinged German that the count was waiting for breakfast in the hall reminded him that his life, at least, was enjoyable. Taking time to bask in the fragile red of the dawn, dressed with slow precision and care; straightened the creases of the uniform from the brown case, brushed the gold laurels on the cap and the thick band on the sleeve, buttoned his silver braided epaulettes, and finally, almost gingerly under all the formality, descended the cold stone staircase. A heavy door of the strongly chiseled and finely beveled gray granite led into a sprawling rectangle of a room of the same stone. Inside a round table of dark wood and comically large proportions sat decked out with silver platters. Bright light sparkled onto a large spread of blood sausage, little brown quail eggs, pitchers of cream and coffee, bowls of large grapefruit, and a singular old man, dressed in nothing less than a bathrobe so full of pink silk and gold brocade it could have been a byzantine curtain around him. Behind him, a small fire, diminished further by the stature of the huge stone fireplace in which it sat. Gesturing with his left hand the man brought Jo towards him and the table, and as he did so the reason for the brightness of the room became apparent. Walls of the same gray speckled with sparkling white quartz and black gabbro under the rays of a sun which passed through a huge glass roof. He couldn't imagine how they had transported the huge panes of glass out here- maybe in a specially designed truck- that might be why the road to this place was so uniquely paved.

Jo walked across the sparkling granite to a seat at the large wood table. The man, he now realized he was presuming to be the count, nodded and, mouth full of food gestured at the spread, coming to rest at the plate. Jo grabbed a couple of eggs and a sausage and went to town with the fancy silver cutlery. Here, the man spoke: “Those spoons have the crest of the von Waldmueller's, the little ax against the frond of trees, see there” pointing high on the hilt of his own spoon. “Not so old a family, but certainly one of repute in recent times for our honorable service.” Jo nodded, commenting “maybe not the von Waldsangs, but respectable nonetheless?” but the old man seemed bemused. No doubt that little book hadn't been seen outside of a firepit when the geriatric count was reading new things with as yet fresh eyes.

He was in the middle of the blood sausage when the Count spoke. His voice was dry, drier than old paper, crumbling with the mildew and rot of age. It came in sputters, rasping like rusted iron and sputtering like candle smoke. Only his canines remained, making the puckered lips wolfish and the words mush. “You remind me of a man I met once.” He waited for Jo to respond to the bait. “Trick of the trade. Faceless bureaucrats, not dashing cavaliers these days.” The count smirked, skull peeling back the flesh of his gaunt yellow cheeks. “A lancer. From India. Church... Churchtower? Nie, nie... Church...” “Churchill?” Jo supplied. He had learned to indulge the

eccentricities of his betters long ago, after he stopped bucking like a wild horse in the schools. “Yahhh.” The Count sucked on a glass of wine. “Churchill.” Silence stifled the sparkling stone room, deafening, like a mausoleum. “He was in India, yes. A buck when I met him, but rotting. You know, those fucking English.” Jo stared. “But funny. He told me a story once.” Jo swished the harsh coffee in his mouth, rinsing the rich blood sausage flavor around with bile over his throat. Swish, swish, swish. The Count resumed. “He had many stories... the horrors of Calcutta... ha. As if they could compare to the Forts the Apaches took back in ‘59.” Silence returned. Oppressive. Lingering. Memories swirled as the Count rasped again. “Maybe the rot smelled worse. They took more scalps too. Bloody. Not as clean as...” He grinned wolfishly. “You know. A man like you.” He scrapped his stiff black collar, as if to gesture at the green skull that pinned Jo’s in place. As if. The skulls were long gone, hidden in a drawer in a brothel in the Capitol. Jo glanced down, just to be sure. “But, the rot must have been worse. Those Indians... worse than ours. Better than ours. More human. But... worse for it. He said in a temple...” the breath rattled out of the broken mouth. A breath too long. Jo thought of the old man, and something hot rose in his chest. Crush the feeling. His eyes reflected the sparkle of the granite room, glistening... too much. “They had a temple at least, you know. Them Calcuttans. But no White Christ. No All-Father. A corpse of a woman, painted blue... to hear him tell it...” Jo took another bite of the sausage, forced himself to chew the rich meat, to swallow, to hold it all in. “Oozing blood. The savage had made it up like that. Paint. But...” the Count began to cough, a death rattle, an unnatural whistle from the skull, impossible with the red gape that lay between the yellow ivory of fangs. “The British... bloody lobsterbacks... well, he said they ‘found’ the statue painted black with the dried blood of children, bayoneted there. By their parents. He said...” The Count sniffed the wine, gazing into the garnet sunglow cast from the great white windows. “You could tell it was he who had taken the brush.” He smirked, he let that linger. “And they say we are barbarians. Let them last a single day in this wilderness.” He raised the impeccably carved venetian crystal. “Long life, God with Us, a people, a country, and our leaders.” Jo stared. He made what could have been a salute with his steel cup, and drained the very last of the very last remnants of the coffee, willing the drips to seem full hearted as they mingled with the blood sausage crumbs on his teeth.

Once it had settled- once he had settled, turned his mind, the breakfast was filling and nutritious. Much better than a swig from a bottle on horseback or iron track. After he had let it sink to the pit of his stomach, after he had rinsed himself with the bitter black drink, once he thought of the ancient age of the stones, let himself marvel at what they might have seen of God’s creation. The Count, Alexander he said, excused himself to freshen up, but announced that he would lead a tour of the estate afterwards. Jo took the brief interlude to look up ‘Alexander von Waldmueller’ on the internal NavInt network- they’d have a file on a noble with an estate like this. A file they had- Waldmueller was an eccentric son of an eccentric Colonel who had been decorated repetitively during the War and then the Reconstructive campaigns in the South-East. He had been given a large estate and enough title to acquire slaves to work it, and had turned it into a profitable little island into, of all things, heather brooms and maple. To hold down the store of drying timber and heather he had built a stronghold, big enough to hold off anything smaller than a 40mm shell, which by that point had become scarce in the hands of the Red. Word was that that was changing, but the castle was now well behind the territorial line, with the brutal frontier scalpings and raids now nothing more than a legend of The

Further East, pulp whispers of the Ivanoviches' Slave Putsch or cousin's stories of the Red Flame replacing fearful memories of Temuchsenka's raiding. Fucking insipid that an active warzone became a legend; but then the Vikings in Valhal must have felt the same way looking at their latter day brethern alongside all the martyrs of Christ. *Tant pis.*

The old Count met him outside the glass dining hall, flanked by equally decrepit Simon and two other bearded, bald-headed men in gray tunics. More steppe linen, likely. They introduced themselves as Yuri and Nikol, but kept an appropriate distance for their rank. The Count chuckled as they introduced themselves, maybe a tick of senility, because he quickly adopted a very serious tone as he described the maple grove which stood below the high stone walls and then the wide range of heather which was easy to radio-electrically monitor from watchtowers. At any given time they'd have twenty, maybe twenty-five slavs working in the fields or curing the lumber; or else rented out for breeding. Inside, he had his housemen, mostly manjacks like Semyon or Yuri, man the walls and the guns. Slav slaves with guns? Jo was taken aback by this. How could they tolerate seeing their brothers at work in the field? "Ah, that's the trick!" the Count's old eyes lit up with a sapphire flame, "The only way out of wasting away in the fields is to demonstrate that superlative quality that shows a man can be educated. I'm talking about real self-respect, and also some level of accomplishment." He nodded at Yuri- "for example, Semyon manages the household, but Yuri really is that one in a million men of his race. It's in him that the possibility of education and salvation, real leadership of their kind comes to fruition." Jo still looked confused- independent minded? Leadership? Weren't these glorified butlers and prison guards? Yuri had begun to smirk as they rounded a portion of the wall and the gleaming radar tower came into view. "But surely, a man like yourself, you must have heard about Yuri too? Aren't you all keeping tabs on him?" the old Count made it sound like an interrogatory demand. Yuri? Some fucking slav- wait, could it be that Yuri? "Yuri... Ivanovich?" Yuri's smirk widened.

Jo was unable to process that information, as the revelation got buried under an avalanche of minutiae about the maple curing and the river sawmill, and the garden plots, and the local weather, and the cold store, and the threat of raiders, and a hundred other details of the little autarky. When the Count von Waldmueller dismissed him though, until lunch at least, the impact of that hit him. He was walking back towards his chamber to sit and file a report, but... Yuri Ivanovich was in custody again. After years of inciting unrest and disobedience in the Prison-Labor colonies for irredeemable slavs, down in the mines and massive industrial forges of the Donn, he had led a riot which killed thirty guards, leaving mutilated corpses in their wake before they disappeared. Several major expeditions had looked for him; hundreds of fur-covered white bounty hunters and traitorous reds had been paid off looking to bring him down and send a message- a head on a pike; all had failed. But this whole time he had been here, on a plantation, working House security for a land baron? The questions which followed were more concerning: What was he doing loyally in contemptible servitude? What was the Count doing refusing to report him? What were they both doing being so presentable to an ostensibly faithful intelligence officer? Was his rot and failure so fully on display?

He limited himself to half a flask of some oak-casked liquor, dipping the flask into the barrel, staining his fingers, sucking them dry, almost savoring the fire water. He stared in a mirror and whispered sweet nothings of reassurance and pride to

himself. He had been as meticulous as possible from the first days of officer training school; even since the strife, when things had opened, he had kept himself private and cloistered, more than any monk. All it would have taken was a slip up- a single drunk night out, a single conversation too loud with Weorsaske or some other junior officer, a flippant curse that was selected or phrased delicately enough- and it would have been child's play for the Count to see the personnel files in the Armed Force's security dossier. He himself could have been an intelligence officer. He finished steeling himself with a quick prayer, Christ have mercy, and then stumbled a bit towards the door. Returning to the great chamber for a lunch was harder than he had thought after a couple days off the sauce, the walls at the turning landings jumping at him faster than he would have guessed, but he made it, dignity preserved behind a breath mint and the stiff legged march of his dress uniform, keeping a formal upright appearance as his whiskey-drunk legs folded into one of the dark wooden armchairs that surrounded the table. His confidence bolstered, he looked into the Count's eyes, a hunter's eyes, trying to read what was there- fear, anger, hate? All he saw was jade-blue circles around a black dot. A geriatric like this- was it the intense sunlight bathing the glimmering granite, or could it be an opiate? A gloved hand dropped towards his hip-holster, the white leather and the flash of blue-and-gold drawing the Count's eyes; it returned carrying only his beautiful pocket-watch, and failed to elicit even a flinch. The old man was opening his mouth, unnaturally full and white teeth rising from dry and wrinkled lips, but already that kid-white glove was streaking into his breast-pocket as if to draw legal papers or a warrant, and the mouth snapped shut, a trap sprung around air before it could be carefully laid, the old face blanching in suspense. The hand emerged, holding not a yellow sheet of paper, nor an electric-screen with a wanted-list, but only an electric pipe.

Breath in, fill the mouth with fumes, exhale the vapor, let it scatter, quick breath through the nose into the lungs, pout again, fill the mouth again- trying to cover his entire visage in clouds of sunlight and pale oil vapor, leaving only a dim digital cherry glowing orange through the mist. It might have worked if he didn't inhale too hard, forcing him into a fit of coughing as the smog entered his lungs, forcing a retreat and the return of the pipe to his breast-pocket. At least he had pegged the old Count- worried about paperwork, not worried about being shot. Already Semyon was bringing in a large silver platter of roast quail, pickles, mustards, rye bread, and large pitchers of a rich amber beer covered with a full head of froth. Following Semyon's burdened treads, Yuri came strolling confidently, and took a seat. After he coughed once- maybe at the vapor- the Count seemed to notice the change. "Ah, Commodore Wenschler, I've asked Yuri to join us. A buck such as himself, even an upstanding one, could learn a lot from a fine fellow like you, and if you don't mind terribly the breach of etiquette, he'd sit with us." A slav at the same table? Even a house-broken one- this was basically unheard of and incredibly bizarre. Counts no more seated their hunting dogs at a table than their servants, let alone an abject creature like the slav. Jo, of course, did not mind- they were people, and even if it had been a dog, it was in von Waldmueller's purview to do as he pleased with his property in his keep.

He noted that Yuri did not drink any of the beer- more for him- but that Count von Waldmueller did ease him as he sank into a stupor of fine food and drink. They discussed the situation in the East, the prospects of who would replace the old governor-general, what the South-East was like, how the changes in the seasons were wreaking havoc on the trees, and whether or not there was any point in hunting West of the Wolga. Jo was of the opinion that small animals and deer were still grand game

above the northern treebelt, and that Bison had been reintroduced into the new state of Lower Livonia to help grind out the pesky remains of the Zentraleo people. On the other hand, the lack of bear and wolves, and the increasingly dismal state of the elk populations, and then the waves of Safari tourists looking to shoot some of the tame bison from a train- it was all too weak, Count von Waldmueller felt, more fit for ladies who hunted vermin with popguns, than for a man on the stalk. Only the transuralic mountains really offered that feel of danger and wildness, although he hadn't been there in some years. Yuri sat in silence, listening to the conversation and betraying no hint of emotion. How did he feel about the destruction of the farmlands around the Central Rada fire-councils fifty years ago? Did he feel any kinship, or were the old intertribal blood feuds of the wild land still stronger than their innate mistrust of civilization? His eyes, like the Sphinx in Rome, gave no answer.

He spent the rest of the afternoon in his room, flicking over articles about Ivanovich, classified reports about the various assassination attempts, notes about the camps he had spent time in and the various bosses he had had, the riots and strikes he had tried to organize within them, and the huge amount of time he had spent digging solitary shafts looking for ore veins as recompense. Finally he found his labor-camp writings, a document that was floated in some intelligence or intelligentsia circles but almost never read, radical and fiery. Skimming it, he found hot and clear anger, a wide breadth of history (different than the standard textbooks of course, probably distorted oral legends of the slaves with romantic fairy tales about better days when they were savage and lived in asiatic communion) but still impressively detailed and accurate about the war and the Party and the importance of the Nation and civilizational culture. Few people inside those circles wrote anywhere as clearly about the pressures inside the National Community that resulted in the strife, the small farmers and the office men, skilled engineers and artisans, big plantations and corporate mines and slaves as Yuri Ivanovich had; and he did it from the perspective of someone trapped most of the year at the bottom of a four-by-two pit with no shelter. Like no-one else he captured what it meant, what it must have meant to be a human reduced to a piece of barter, nothing more than a motor behind a pick, fueled not with oil but with potatoes, looking forwards to a life of indefinitude unto an early grave, dug with every coal dust burst that exploded from the tip of his rusty iron pick, no family, no language, no community- and then to be told that if he could live ten more years in hell, he would be forced out, to wander a vast and inhospitable land of methane sinkholes, horse-raiders who had been hunting men since Genghis Khan rode, frost and death, far away from the only place he could ever have known as home.

Even the shape of the letters written in crooked latin on waste-paper and then scanned by a higher force into the lines of code that displayed an image on his little screen, bore a testament to the human suffering embedded within. To know something like this, an ode and a lament more sorrowful than any psalm of mourning, pulled all the old strings in him; who could not hate the pitiful excuses and myths of a land cleaned by jewish disease and famine, divine wrath against the atheists or simple biological Right against a lesser parasite- who could not hate the insipid city-dwellers with their pulpy shows and false hagiography of the people who fled a life of curtsying to party big-wigs for the freedom of the frontier- or for the Red men who so justly and savagely dug knives into the skulls of those unfortunate souls damned to sin and steal? And of course- he could not even bear to think about the things he was party to, waves of moving undead things, worse than the chlorine gas which had so offended the Intelligentsia who had manufactured it?

Dusk brought mists of pink and gold eeking through slate layers of cloud, dancing light across the serene calm of the snow-dusted heather and maple, disrupted only by little wisps of smoke from the squat timber-and-earth slave houses spread around the fields, decorated only with little carvings in the timber, fetishes of clan and family, the only record of life or community that was allowed to these people to be recorded in something that didn't wilt under the mustard-yellow mists of time and death. He thought about the Eddas, written down a millenia ago, the only source of the National Memory that the Party had revived; like the scraps of renaissance afterbirth that had fueled the Imperial Republican mania of the Yankees, it mixed with a Christianized European soil; could these little people in rude wood huts, probably a tradition dating to times as old and illiterate as the German farmers who had met with legionnaires, ever stand out of their own substrate? In some unread section of the scrawling will of Yuri Ivanovich, a little paragraph mocked the idea that the slavs, christian or jew, had lived such meager lives out of time for all of recorded history- that the mansions and plots of Serfdom and settlement laws, and then their abolition, that the collectives and gardens of Sovietism and refugee had been a culture, different but in no way stagnant or dynamic, but always struggling and moving, that explosive effusion of life where the ashes and embers of tradition fueled the leaping fires of change. That section, like most of his life's work, remained unread, unthought, unspoken- memories of pain in a hole, wondering why God had condemned his people to this. The weight of the darkening sky was only broken by the occasional piercing light of a singular star or planet, that thin melting crescent of a moon from the morning having vanished hours ago.

Darkness brought the huts to the fore of the landscape, little wax-paper windows glowing pale yellow, turning the snow around them into brazen warmth. Dinner brought Semyon to his door again, requesting his presence at the table once more. Down below, a series of large candelabras sat illuminating the table, although strangely they were all only half lit; however, there were six of them, all large fixtures of gold emblazoning strange shapes over pale blue and porcelain white, dancing bright flames on thick honey-yellow beeswax candles. Heaps of mashed apple, thick soured cream, and crispy dark potato-puffcakes covered with chives sat on the plates; and now, more than Yuri, nine other Slavic types sat around the table, thick dark beards and the gray tunics of earlier in the day- the Count's security detail no doubt. Von Waldmueller himself seemed very uncomfortable, but Yuri now seemed in his elements, flashing a broken yellow smile, gap toothed and crooked, his curly black hair and swarthy skin gleaming like light through rich honey-brown glass. A pale white wine, as sweet as the Rhine and as delicate was poured into sparkling crystal by the circling Semyon outside the ring of lights. Although overcast, the glass ceiling sparkled with the light of stars, the dancing flames of the candles from below. Jo quickly found himself falling into the rhythm of the group, although they all seemed rather cautious whenever they remembered he was there. The meal went fast and was rather sparse, but the conversation kept flowing under thickly accented German as Semyon cleared the plates and brought out servings of bitter tea and sugar-crusted orange-peels to every place. Conversation paused for a half-second when Semyon and the Count had a mix-up with the plate clearing resulting in sour cream staining both their hands, but the tension broke when Yuri began to insistently laugh at their expense, bringing the rest of the garrison with him. The bitter tea and the sweet orange candy went well together, but all in all it was a very light dinner, and he was beginning to feel the urge to leave the raucous and hard to understand conversation

which seemed to involve some of the slave women in the fields and the guards- a clear and evident danger of having the cocks guard the henhouse. Although, thinking that, perhaps foxes guarding the coop was worse. He was about to rise when the smell of roasting beef wafted through the room and Semyon entered behind a big tray of beef ribs slathered with a rich dark brown sauce. It was tender enough to sag off of the bones on the fresh silver plates, and rich enough to make his mouth sweat. Finally, feeling fatigue and fullness set in, rapidly losing his ability to follow even the basic contours of the conversation, seeing von Waldmueller increasingly agitated (doubtless by angry old age), he excused himself to the party and returned to the soft bed.

In the night, in his dreams, things came to his room. The windowsill gazed out over the landscape sprinkled with snow that sparkled blue under the thin light of a fading crescent in the early hours of a morning, and in the window sill a majestic bird, rather like a peacock sat and gazed at him. It leaned forward into the shadow of the walls of his chamber, becoming black and red-eyed like some demon-raven, whispering out phrases, ominous and full of warning. To leave the comfort of the bed was to invite danger; to ignore the bird was to damn himself. That thing on the sill kept stretching through the glass and the frost-light towards him, neck longer and longer, a twisting coil of shadow and smoke humming deep as a hallucination inside his brain. "Sin burns," it whispered into his pillow, sending him stiff in terror; "sin burns until it burns no more" and then vanishing in a cloud of vapor which soaked into his pores, and then he found himself at the round table, eating the flesh of a man, "it's only a Jew" the Count laughed, "barely an animal" and the old man started carving, catching rivulets of blood in a silver chalice. The comradery of the group which he had felt so strongly and warmly around the beef was replaced with terror and terror alone, and then the Jew on the table, swarthy and hairy as an Ivan, began to thrash and pound on the stone...

Pounding, waves of sound bouncing off the granite walls, reverberating through the maple door around the drumbox of a bed-place, pounding into the soft tissue of his ears, pounding fluid inside his cochlea, pounding shocks of electricity and salt along his brain-

The sun was peering above a clear horizon, glinting off something on the windowsill, outside the glass, a peacock feather...

Semyon gave another knock. "The master requests you at the breakfast table." Had he ever called the Count "Master" before? A faded scrap of waste-paper with charcoal writing on it in smooth latin print- "help us" was it from Yuri? And into his dress pocket, the uniform, bulky and warm and strong against his skinny heaving chest and sweaty undershirt, the firm feel of his leather and steel boots pressing his calves into a high arch, down again. Good of the Count to put him up, feed him, show him this archaic castle in the twilight of the life of Baronies, manumission like a storm, walls of strife all around and them in the eye of the moment.

At the breakfast table, a large porcelain pot, no smell of coffee, but instead the bitter tea, bread and apples and maple syrup, thick and sweet over the rolls, and there- the Count sat quietly, and at his left hand sat Yuri. Perhaps, on closer examination, Yuri sat there, and the Count was on his right. They simultaneously gestured for him to sit. He did, and then poured himself a large cup of tea, and took a couple of the sweet-rolls. "Before we really get into things, I want to show you something," Yuri said, reaching inside the rolling folds of the tunic around his chest. His hand emerged with a matte black composite handgun, gently placed inside his

hand against the table. "There are ten of us, and only you. Don't think you can fuck us." Jo hoped he remained expressionless instead of bemused. "Are you trying to take me hostage?" Yuri stared at the handgun for a moment. "I have something else to show you." His other hand swung across his body, down below the table towards his hip, and then swung back up with a piece of paper. "This is a record of the satellite networking you've used in the past two days. The Count owns the whole network in the area, and we can monitor it all," he snapped his fingers "easy as that." Jo nodded, unsurprised. They weren't the only ones monitoring his rare electronic forays. "It's interesting, you know. We figured a coinflip if you'd radio out right away, bring down a storm on this place." "That was your plan? What next, get killed?" Yuri chuckled.

"We're a dying breed. Outlaws. Slavs. Red men. When manumission comes and you force half of us to pay you for a company shack out of wages we make in a mine, and the other half starve walking to Siberia- that's not a life. That's not a choice. This is our land, our homes, our place in the world. You can't sweep us under a rug or into the desert. We will show the world that some of us are still willing to fight- a last use of my name. But you didn't bring down that storm. You haven't done much but drink." Jo felt indignant. "And die here too? I have my own plans under this sun, buddy, and I'm not your tool." Yuri tapped his handgun. "What, shoot me to stop a storm? You could send the message yourself. I think you think this is half-assed and suicidal." Yuri shrugged. "Nothing else to do. I suppose all the martyrs were suicidal, but we still feast for them." "Is that really worth a life?" Jo asked. "Look, Yuri, from your book I can see you're intelligent enough. Obviously, it would make more sense for me to have radioed it in after I left this place and got away from you and your popgun." he pointed at the handgun, which in fact was quite a bit more menacing than a popgun. "So, why tell me this?" He broke into a sweet-roll, dipping the chunks of bread into his tea, eating the soft sticky bun. "We are dead if you do radio it in- and that's our plan." The Count looked down, downcast at his plate. "But if you don't? We saw your posting- NavInt South-East command, based at Khanstadt. That's something useful." "You're trying to bargain with me? What could we possibly barter Yuri? Some maple brooms?" He grinned and drank from the teacup. This was starting to get interesting. "Look, Commodore" Yuri said, addressing him more formally, "NavInt is pretty useful. You could give us a lot of information. And the Count here-" he poked the old man by his side "he's sitting on a pile of gold. And either he's sympathetic enough to our cause, or else-" he tapped his gun again.

"What can you offer me besides gold? Suppose I'm ideological, suppose I'm not some corrupt and venal porkbelly. What will you do then? Say I let this old slav-loving coot live" The Count stood up at this. "Yuri keeps my slaves in order, and he's a damn sight tougher than city-boy fuck-ups like you, or sadistic animals dropping chlorine and plague from a tin-can in the sky! If we don't have fights from people like him- if cowards like you get your way, and there isn't a single slave to work or fight from Brest to Fort Schlieper!" He collapsed, exhausted back into his chair. Yuri just shook his head. "If you take us up, we will contact you. We get electronic communiques passing through our node on secure low-range channels even NavInt might want- especially from other branches. Even ideologically, you could justify that." Jo looked back at Yuri. He thought back to the sense of camaraderie and freedom around the meal of the past night. "It would be, in all honesty, a genuine honor Mr. Ivanovich." He held out his hand- a long shot, a big gamble, but- wasn't it a dream come true? What he might be able to do with this later...

8: The Archbishop of Wolves



The gate stood inside the old house. It swung out midway across the sagging wood stairs, lit by the blue flame of light caught in the dust that passed above it. The thing itself was large, five feet high, great thick planks of some wood that seemed full of cracks where "mystical orient" seeped out. It seemed to be designed in Tibetan- or more probably what some delusional sociologist had decided was Tibetan. Great thick limbs stretched top to bottom, painted a red that was still brilliant in the half-light. They were inlaid with geometric designs, deep wedge cuts and mesh, painted white and green. Here and there little bosses of gold stood out in the dimness. It swung out from some eminently fantastic fetish of a guard tower on the side of the stairs, tied with thick red silk cords which had hardly mildewed even as the rest of the house groaned and shrank with age. What pretense, to have a guard house and an oriental step like this to enter the study of some old man. Did he think his mind was Shangri-La, a jewel to hide from competitors and plebeians? The idea that someone like this could be trying to keep out ghosts was laughable. Insane as the visionary man had grown, the implantation of a conscience was something Jo would not allow. His corpse, it was rumored, moldered there still. When the details of some bloody battle which had involved women and children (well, it was called a battle by many) had leaked out, the big politicians had sidelined him, left him to die in disgrace. Well, the shithead had died in a mansion, even a gauche one like this. No fond public memory at least, for a man who had done so much to enshrine the new order of little farms, forts, and blockhouses, held up by a patchwork or flayed human skin and the pride of antiquarian nobles and city dwellers with cash and ego. A little personal victory and a great political defeat, forever undermining each other.

The rub was there, Jo decided, as he swung his little knife, cut the cord, and pulled that strong wood frame open. You could humiliate a lion. You could hold his jaws open with your arms- no need for a Tyr to lose his hand, just hold the great yellow teeth apart with human strength. And as great a mighty and impossible a feat as that was- well was it worth trying to reach into that fleshy cavern, cut and pull and rip out the essence of some recently butchered lamb? Could you resurrect, to be crass, something that had been half shat out? Rub or no rub, his honor was loyalty to his duty, and there was one duty higher than family, higher than race or nation or preferred art style or favorite football club, his Cause, his heart and soul. The upstairs of the mansion was full of chicken feathers and rotten guano. The old dog had been a chicken farmer to the last- maybe those had feasted in style on his corpse. His body, had it ever really been there, was no more. But a large steel desk stood, soiled and stained with refuse. If he could reach in and find the bones of a sheep, well maybe that would slow the devouring craze of the other lions yet- if, indeed, one could talk to a lion.

Khanstadt smelled. You could taste it in the wind, five miles out, where the sprawl of homesteads and well-fertilized garden-plots was just giving way to tenements and strips of shops, gravel and broken tarmac folding into hardened cement and clean lines. Every breath brought a different cocktail of the whole of the east. Everything good that traveled on the Wolga passed here, to be packaged and stored and re-routed through the Saratov canal and then on to the Black Sea. Charnel from a million head of cattle a week, unnumbered poultry and swine, mountains of sweaty pelts and the acidic bite of their tanning vats, fermenting vegetables, vast frozen containers of dairy, mountains of salt, silk, spices without name, hemp tar, tobacco, tea, opium paste, jewels, ground bones, reduced waste fertilizer, burnt coal, cotton and wool fibers, molten plastic fumes, incense, acrid smoke from smelters, the whirl of a hundred thousand computing units tracking it all, salt and fish, blood and guts, a living and sweating semi-nomadic horde of millions sprawling along the dusty Caspian Coast, draining and desalinizing the edges for ten thousand luxury mansions and their coast-gardens which demanded ever more water for thirsty floral blooms of incense

and brilliant rills. Everything in the world hunted, grown, or made north of Chengdu and Baghdad, and west of Ulaanbaatar poured into the Caspian, container ships flooding the banks, checking in at the immense chrome and marble customs tower before flooding into the countless ports of the Black Sea, no need to navigate the Cape Horn, the storming Atlantic, the never ending tolls of the Bosphorus and Suez, straight to the great market of Germania's jeweled cities. Thick black Arctic oil pipelines heading anywhere west of the Carpathian-North Sea forest-belt filled a hundred thousand tankers a year, mixing with the hundreds that sailed up from lower down the Caspian, pouring into the Mediterranean to feed the hungry engines of the world. This was a filthy city, choked by smog and dirt even with the great steppe winds blowing through the towers of mansions and foundries, timber yards, mills, entrepôts, pharmacologic refineries, streets literally paved with bricks of Ural Gold and Silver, humming and whirring, a churning mass that did not stop even in when the winters dropped well below -20, -40. It was here that he had worked to be given the keys to the East, the intelligence machine at his beck and call to execute his great plan. It was here, now, that he had two weeks to make his moves before fleeing to the northern seat of power, a final contingency, a last throw of the dice as the walls closed in. He hitched his white horse, a gift of the Count, at the last stable. He offered the reins to a surprised boy, his little brown eyes grateful enough to make him think that the fine horse was in noble hands, and then he stepped onto that perfectly smooth concrete, stared up and out at something besides empty sky for the first time in two months, and took a deep breath. It was beginning.

His imposing dark blue uniform lined with gold-braid fetched him a motorcycle cab, where he handed over a written address, and then leaned back in the attached rickshaw. The ride was quick and felt life-threatening, weaving in and out of traffic on the autoways and then around pedestrians and food stalls and street shops in the walking quarters. They wove through the bustling maze of buildings which grew taller and grayer, shifting from mud-brick and pine to concrete, then to glass and steel. Finally the buildings parted, burst through into a sea of blue and green, the wide caspian reaching out under a gray December sky, the scrub and palm of a Mediterranean park mixing with the white mansions of the wealthiest in Khanstadt. The cyclist took a hard right run onto a road which ran between the imposing facade of the city and the verdant parkway along the sea. Fresh salty air mixed with the fumes of a million half-smoked cigarettes, alleys of puke and piss, waves of oil smoke from frycarts. They whipped down the road, swerving in and out among trucks and private stretch-cars, luxury vehicles and bicycles. This was a totally different experience from the austere streets of his home suburb along the northern coast, with strict traffic laws and air quality control. His first time in the city, he had felt *seasick* on the land in a strange way. Now, on his fifth tour, he felt much more seasoned, but he could never believe that anyone would be comfortable living here.

Rushing past the skyline, huge digital images of the Yule-Odin, dressed in red velvet and furs, bag bursting with gifts of golden combs and miniature rifles, flashing his big one-eyed smile out to the wide world. The animation flickered back and forth standing tall and high above the sacred grove where sacrifices to him were made by stockmen hoping that hanging some maimed sheep shanks would let them buy fine jewelry to send to their families back in the homeland. Underneath the glowing screen, crowds thronged towards the market-halls, moving past students and failed desperados playing fiddles, pipes, guitars and fake-rustic drums in yule hymns to Odin for his blessing. Some places held up a hanging Odin from a yew tree alongside

the cross at Easter, but in the winter season they tried for the commercial competition with the youth instead of finer theological arguments. Every year it seemed that the country slid further into chaos- competing waves of evangelical revivalism and pagan furor egging each other on in strange and strange forms. Perhaps that was to be celebrated as part of culture; or perhaps he was simply finally expressing that conservatism which his class was so reputed for. That made him shudder a little on his own.

Their road headed to the filthy river-mouth, where it slunk under the rust-colored iron bridges. It was full of charnel and rot, half butchered skeletons of sheep and pigs, some of them in coats, sometimes even the odd hat bobbing amongst them. The fumes of rotting sewage. Along the river lay a long half-tube of concrete wrapped in a thick steel spiral, presenting no windows to the sky. "Alright, this is it man" the cabby told him in a shockingly familiar fashion. "It'll be 300 marks pal" the man said with a bit of a Holsteiner accent, maybe playing it up for sympathy with an officer- "one of them" in a way. Whatever, it came out of the tax coffers, he could go without. He turned back to the motorcycle cab, about to ask what the good bars were, but the bandana laden driver was already vanishing into the flow of traffic. He shrugged, turned back towards the smell of the river, and kept himself from gagging as he sprinted towards the thick bronze doors that capped one end of the horizontal tube.

Inside, the lights were all a comfortable yellow-orange glow, warm and soft as they rippled over long banks of mosses and irises growing on thick beds of peat. Gregor Lindemann who ran the place had a real taste for how to live. No need to spend all day staring at the shit-filled river when they had little garden beds of intricate and delicate blossoms inside. He walked up to the secretary desk, where a nervous young man with a strong Bavarian accent (how had he wound up here?) was babbling into a speaker. He removed his hat, placed it so that the gold-silver albatross of the Intelligence Division faced the man, and then rapped his knuckles as he planted his hands on the glass table. The man paused, disconnected the call and looked up. Immediately followed by a jump and a very swift salute, he called out in too loud of a voice "Sir! What can I do for you SIR?" "I'm here for a meeting with Lindemann," he replied. "It's commodore Josia Wenschler. I'll be taking over command here, uh succeeding, the belated KA Tillmann. You have an appointment written down?" He gestured towards the man's mess of papers. "Sir," the secretary started and then paused. He was quite young, maybe twenty. Very young for a job in this branch. "Sir," he tried again, almost floundering, "Chief Warrant Officer Lindemann has not reported in for duty in two days."

First things first. He had the Secretary, Gruber, show him to old Tillmann's office, turn over the keys, and then fetch a certain Petty Officer Ulrich Jueress. Woersaske had had the man as a marine boat leader, and found him competent, but noted that he seemed totally apolitical. The man who arrived was close-cropped and beet-faced, starting to gray, and incredibly muscular under the pale blue-green marine field fatigues he wore. Jo instructed him to begin arranging the personnel and book-keeping files, and tabulate expenses over the past two months if Gruber would bring him receipts. He would be back in the evening to go over it all, but he had some calls to make to find Lindemann. A technical specialist gone missing, and 48 hours before he took command? Bad news. He knew roughly where Lindemann's quarters were, but he verified with Gruber. "Sir, I can assure you, we've called his residence. He just isn't there."

He left the concrete submarine just as the gray december skies lurched ominously into a gray december rainstorm. Lindemann had a nice house, picket fence, garden, all the whistles, with the rest of the officers. But, he knew Gregor well. The man had a second apartment here, sensible for anyone, but especially if they had certain... inclinations, notorious of Navy personnel. He took out his pocket phone and called a home number, just to double check. The line was dead- he trusted Gruber when he said the house was empty. The rain was getting worse, poorly draining concrete streets perfect for the dry summers were already inundated with an inch or more of freezing water. If he wasn't checking out the man's house, he'd need to find people who knew where else he might be. What better place to start than the bar across the street, glowing in warm neon pink and cool blue, "bierbusch". He flipped up the epaulette covers, rolled down the sleeve shields, jammed his conspicuous hat into the briefcase, and then dashed around the traffic, slow moving trucks spewing diesel into the rain. He pushed through the glass and bronze door, hair wet and plastered to his scalp, cold water streaming down his face. For a minute he had been alive.

With his insignia covered up the navy-blue polyester and leather jacket was evidence enough of who he was, but he hoped that it showed a gesture of unofficial goodwill, not official discriminatory investigation. He pulled up along the fake-marble bar, tapped the counter, and asked for something sour. The gold hands of the watch moving over the intricate grinding wheels pointed to 16h, reasonable on a Saturday. The man next to him, burly and ginger bearded, evidently agreed, flashing Jo a smile with a magnificent set of pearly teeth. "So, stranger, a Navy type? What's a Mariner like yourself looking for on a wet day like this?" Jo turned, noticed that his sour beer was already present, and paused to swill a long draught. Acidity tingled with alcohol and sugar, swirling around his mouth, scorching his vocal cords, then down the long descent of his throat. "I'm looking for a friend," he responded bluntly, only to have the big man interrupt. "If you buy me a couple rounds, it could get friendly, eh?" Jo managed a thin lipped smile. He looked up at the barkeep, a sallow man with slicked back black hair and an emaciated goatee, and nodded. Shortly after, the big man had a full stein against his lips, and Jo produced a picture of Gregor. "Seen him?" The man stared back. "A Navy man asking questions isn't very friendly. At least with the boys in black, you know what they're really after. Haven't seen you around here either, and my mother warned me to watch out for strangers." Jo nodded. "He's a friend, a personal one, and missing. No idea where a type like him might go?" The man looked pensive. "Get us a bottle of Peach Schnapps. It's what all the navy guys who come here take, that might jog my memory a little." Jo sighed.

Several swigs of peach schnapps into the evening, he found himself heading back to the desk. The rain had slowed to a faint drizzle of mist, but out on the southern horizon the massive stormfront only seemed darker by the orange glow of the city's salt lamps and apartment towers, reflecting that sodium-tinged light off slick sidewalks. The rain had cleared out the smell of the city, the foul rot in the river washed out of the air for a moment. He stopped to light a cigarette and take some deep breaths of cold air before heading back to relieve Jueress of the paperwork. He looked at his watch again, 17h40. Fuck, but only two sunsets to go before the long Yule night arrived. A lonely time of year. Fortunately Jueress was good- everything was in neat stacks, alphabetized and clearly laid out. Personnel transfer forms- who to request for what positions, were the only things that needed any real action, as the budget stuff got passed back to the black boxes of intelligence funding, where no one looked too closely. One officer he knew kept a psychic on the payroll as part of some espionage

scheme, although how that classed as an intelligent activity was beyond him. There weren't even that many personnel transfers to do- the south-east was unperturbed by the confusion in the Northeast, and things were quiet during the holiday season. Still, he fixed himself in a half-stupor, a trance of perfect fixation, on the numbers and names, familiarizing himself with the goings on of radar patrols and investigations of other branches, attempts to find leverage on business interests, and of course trying to stop the bleeding flow of rocket grenades towards the Ural bandit tribes.

It was twenty past nine when he left, walking on foot in the mist with his sheltering cap and gold visor. The address he had, where Lindemann went to "blow off steam" was nearby, a cheap apartment on the 8th floor of a concrete worker's house overlooking the rot of the river. The walk was short, the waterproofing on his boots holding firm as they splashed through the orange-stained pools of water. The smell was still there, maybe had never gone away, seeping through the drizzle of cold water, but what he realized now in a state of fatigue and growing sobriety was that the city was at least as loud as it was foul. Maybe he hadn't noticed before, drowned out by the ghastly motorcycle engine or his thoughts about Lindemann, but stepping out from the dead silence of the naval tube, his ears felt tender and exposed to every sound. Throbbing engines in hard steel bodies tearing past him, the clang of hammers and the ever-present bleating of animals as they moved along the slaughter-tracks on the east side of the river, mixing under the human shouts and cries, the grunts and curses of people drinking to forget, drinking to evade, to hide from the sound and the smell of the place, more for the human reasons of boredom and uncertainty and lonely ritual, crowding in bars to make merry and cut waxy scars into their livers and lungs.

Lindemann's apartment door was swinging open in the hallway, flickering fluorescent lights and the buzz of the odd fly down the bare concrete of the floor. A spartan existence. He walked to 8E, peaked his head inside. The place was, on first glance, in good order. The kitchen had some rotting oranges, streaked blue and white with fuzzy penicillium, but the expensive bottles of liquor sat, mostly full, in a kaleidoscope of colors and labels along the back shelves. The man's gear, bags of powder, belt, and syringe were similarly undisturbed when he checked under the sink. It was when he turned around that he noticed the bedroom door, smashed off its hinges, the window behind shattered completely, a desk strewn with papers (mostly paraphernalia), and sad puddles of rain, like pools of tears, gathered along the windowsill. No one had tried to make this look like a robbery gone wrong. Not even the neighboring apartments of young workers had bothered to snag the drink. It could have been a crime of passion, an attractive hypothesis for its dissonance with the constant & dispassionate CWO, but his paranoid sense was ticking. Still, it had a bed, and instant strudel and an electric kettle. If Gregor wasn't using it, he might as well save himself the hotel fare for the night.

Morning light streamed in through the shades that hung over the broken glass. He threw back the thick curtains, but saw no sun, only the huge glittering web of neon and spotlights turning the tumorous clouds a boiling red-brown. Out to the east, the faintest blue ribbons of a midwinter dawn seemed to promise something different, rising over the absolute blackness of the steppe. If the drowning lights of the sleepless metropole hadn't washed everything in their anxious saturation he would have been able to pick out more than one of the faint stars of Aquarius, bearing its cup in precession of that great golden god. To the South, the black mass still hung over the Caspian, black like wrought iron even with the burning electric eyes of the city

reflecting into it. If it had been a targeted thing, if it hadn't been a random killing- the jig was up. He found a plastic bag of some unnamed powder, and in his fresh anxiety he leaned into the red night and bumped some into his nose. They would have his correspondence, and no matter how careful he had been, they were wolves looking for the sick animals, the ones who might pose a danger to the pack, canny and sanguine, and if they even suspected that there was something to suspect, that he might be a person of interest-

As his mind raced like the thunder of the freight trains across the river, he thought about Yuri and the Count. That event alone was enough to get him tossed into the filth of the river with a nine-piece of lead for his eyes and sorrows. He took another bump. Lindemann, always so careful, this would have been tested. Gregor. Dead. They'd gone through the hell of the academy together. He vomited then, out the window, onto the street, a thin stream of gold dancing in the crackle of the electric lights. He was a wolf, too. Some kind of something, maybe a panther, he thought. In the distance, he saw Alpha Aquarius glimmer, then grow and grow and grow, rushing in from the steppe like a hell bent valkyrie. It roared over him, leaving a long trail of fumes, flying hard and low. In the distance, where he thought the star had been, a pale white dawn began to birth itself. Then, he knew what to do, watching the filth choke the river, watching the stream of dissolute drunks stagger back to their work-dorms for a couple hours of sleep before a new shift. He dumped the powder out the window, almost tossing it like salt over his shoulder, a sentimental libation for an unsentimental man.

For the moment, the screaming city of engines was bathed in streetlights. His stomach felt shaky and ill, and he had a strong hankering for a steak. That being his first impressions of the nascent Sunday morning, and without a strong cause to go into the intelligence building, he let himself laze into some of the ludicrous, immaculately cut silken shirts that Gregor had in the closet. Some sort of pastiche of Turkish, Mongol, and Russian barbarity, lined with fur, he figured himself to make quite the image going out. Everyone who knew Khanstadt had heard of the famous cattle herd camps, where prices for cattle were brokered, and the cheapest meat in the world was available camp style, like out on the old American west. As he was leisurely strolling across the bridge he found that the silk clothes conveyed a wonderful sense of freedom and freshness below the waist, and also that he was becoming inured to the smell. He paused over the river, and tried to look out towards the southern sprawl of brush instead of the bloated waste and brown murk below. Behind him, towards the heart of the city, a loud splash followed by several yells rang out. He turned and squinted out, seeing a group of soot-coated men hauling something along in the foul river.

Compared to the icy rain of last night, the gentle breeze of thirty-five degrees felt refreshing- until the smell of cow-shit and blood started pouring along with it. He stopped at a dingy looking shop, and noticed suddenly that he wasn't out of place. In the Capitol, he'd have drawn looks from this side of Alexanderplatz for the get-up he was wearing, and on a Sunday morning no less. But here- he barely stuck out from the crowds of people dressed in everything from bloodstained rags to expensive black silk suits strolling the main quay of the butcher's bay. The little place had a red and white striped awning, and gave off a huge smell of grease, cooking onions, and scorching meat. Large blue letters informed the street that it was "Billy's Yankee Kitchen." The inside was as grimy and dark as the outside had made it look- although

the street was sunny, the towering meat-plants and the thick awning stopped the Sunday glare. Oil-smoke and firelight made the place seem more like an entrance to Hell than a shop. The owner was sooty and sweaty and bulky, standing over a smoking grill covered in flat patties of finely ground meat. He nodded, rather stiffly, towards the man and then looked up at the dingy illuminated menu above the counter. Something calling itself a "Homburg Sandwich" had onions and meat enough for him, so he, still stiff, asked the man, who nodded silently.

As the sandwich was assembling itself behind the counter in the hands of what he presumed to be "Billy the Yankee," the door swung open. There was no tinkle of bells, just a little rush of fresh air- well, not fresh air, but it was cooler than the ambient hot-grease feel of the place. He turned, hoping to politely nod at some pretty face, but instead had a shock of recognition. Yuri Ivanovich, his curly beard and Keratin pressed hair pushed back in a mat. The slav said, in what probably passed for perfect German anywhere, but especially in the dinge of "Billy's Kitchen" "Commodore Wenschler! The Count sends his regards, and me with a message." Jo nodded, and then asked if he could get, uh "you" a sandwich. Yuri seemed unperturbed, checked the menu, and then nodded. Billy grunted and got back to work with a knife on the wheel of meat. When the sandwiches came out, wrapped in checkered white and red paper with fried potato strips, Jo thanked him, handed over a single cash bill (how cheap!), and then gave one of the sandwiches to Yuri. Yuri, in turn, handed him a thumbdrive. "The Count said you'd know what to do with this. Didn't say much else." Jo nodded. "So, what are you doing here, besides giving me this?" Yuri, glanced around cautiously, turned to speak softly in his ear, his mouth barely moving in that cryptic fashion of his. "The Security Staff here has a couple of my men in cages." He looked around, and then lowered his voice even more, as if Billy might be an eager informant- the dark store was still otherwise empty, the table too filthy to be bugged, all his electronics still at Gregor's. "You ever heard of Alfred Fleischhauer? Big priestly type, all dressed up in bearskin and antler headpieces?" Jo nodded. "He's planning on setting up a public sacrifice of condemned slaves, prisoners, you know. Semi-legal, but out here who really cares about a little strange fruit?" "Where are you staying?" Jo asked, suddenly uncomfortable. Yuri shrugged. Jo gave him the address of Gregor's apartment and told him to stay alert- it had been penetrated at least once. He felt safe- Gregor had been mixed up in all kinds of things, likelier to provoke a killing or a disappearance than whispered conversations in a burger joint, but he wasn't sure about Yuri. The big slav nodded, and then paused. "You should know they've still got you bugged. I don't know what it is, but the Central GIS still has your name glowing. That's how I found you." He nodded unsurprised. This day and age, well, nowhere was really private. Any moment could result in a vanishing like Gregor. He had given himself over, alternately, to God and Drink. It simply had to be accepted that he had no privacy outside of a lead lining underneath brown leather. Ivanovich got up and disappeared into the walking-street mob of pedestrians out looking for a Yule roast, tossing his wrapped beef into the gutter as he left. Jo stayed put, staring at the cold, greasy, golden potato fingers, wondering if anyone else was going to walk in after him.

He stopped back at the apartment, bolt and door still blown off but no signs of disturbance, in order to change back into his formal dress. He felt too ridiculous decked out like some boyar chief in silk and ermine. More comfortably fit in his rich blue adorned with gold and silver fringe, he headed back towards the yellow concrete tube of his command. The winter sun was already starting to sink lower in the sky- better here, much better, than his wintry baltic childhood, but still grim. You could see

why there had always been an appeal for people like Fleischhauer, to provide assurance that there was something worse than an early sunset, that the light would return. And these days, with the missile scares and failed putsches and the bleeding frontier weeping from the birthing pains of manumission- well, who knew. Of course, Jo didn't really see it that way. When he wasn't drunk he could see more clearly- Hell, Ragnarok, Apocalypse, Reckoning, Judgment Day, Eschaton, marching from over the horizon, so that not even the yellow clouds of chlorine could hide it. It came in every early thaw and late frost that killed the apple trees he had spent his childhood under. It came in that thick and bruised stormfront to the south, one minute threatening to swallow the daylight, the next appearing to recede. The beauty of it was that it wouldn't spare Fleischhauer anymore than it would a sinner like himself. Already he was ensconced in the protective layers of concrete and rebar, the smell of tropical flowers and rich peat replacing the heavy fumes of coal and blood that dominated the riverside.

At his new desk, in the silence of the oblong tomb (not even Gruber was there on the Sunday eve of Yule), he thumbed the drive. If they were tracking him through some GPS chip on his watch, in his wallet- maybe even from one of the injections they gave any soldiers of the East, they would know where he was, always watching even through the layers of concrete. Maybe it was their concrete- maybe they were his supervisors, cameras in every room swiveling and dilating their eyes, more effective than a Mata Hari with belladonna, pupils as large as a fist covering every inch of his life. That had been the beauty of his plan- just a couple HAM radios for friends to use, just a couple of numbers that didn't match anything. The meaning of the numbers, even to his other conspirators, would not become apparent until the program had launched, spread throughout the octopus's tendrils of Naval missile command wiring that coated the frontiers, not waiting for any Red Herring radio codes or weakness of a collaborator. That was the only way to get such a truly insane plan to work, facing the surety of jail or a camp for any mad protest of the way of the world. To put in the thumb drive- well it was a risk. He couldn't read the Count, or his association with a figure like Ivanovich. Putting it in- anything might happen. A Security Staff coup of his section, and the toppling of the Manumitting government? A *real* missile launch? He pulled his computer out of the network cable, and then popped it in. With the tails he had, there was little to lose. The digital display showed a blue identification print-out of the Staff's most-wanted- ultras like Jensen, Staub and Klette, frontier raiders like "Red Madonna" or "Marat" with no dignifying name, those from the place in between like the Ivanoviches, followed by the unreconstructed Security Staff men like Mahler, who had spent decades hunting the radicals, until they found that they could no longer defend a society which found selling toys stuffed with processed hair from used slav scalps "morally sanctioned" and who had then flocked to lawless ports like Odessa. And then at the bottom- him. Date intended for publication- 10 January 2021. "In connection with the mysterious death of General-governor Beerbohm of the North-East Command." He felt something shift in his stomach.

In truth he hadn't had much of a plan, only dreams of a program that would have disabled the nuclear arsenal and allowed a popular revolt. There wasn't even the faintest line of code yet written, so it was really ludicrous that he'd be added to this list of names from the time of civil strife and putsches, a list that he had lamented like a book of saints to which no names now cared to add themselves, content with Manumission as redemption enough. He had thought that was not redemption

enough, secretly, hidden away, precisely to hide from that destiny, but it had come all the same.

How could he even know if the list was real? It was an old list, full of the names of old radicals. Why would they update it? Maybe the Count was just playing him. On the other hand, if he was taken into questioning in a cell he would never leave, having never done anything but be a good little German Soldier... that wouldn't stop the Security Staff. It might be time to break some rules. He pulled out his metal cigarette, plugged in a fresh cartridge of nicotine, and started inhaling hard. He realized, suddenly, that he didn't even have his briefcase with him, and started to feel waves of panic, walls in the little concrete cell pulling in close, maybe there were already footsteps in the hall... another big breath of vapor in and out, how much did they know? First things first- he had to get back to his briefcase, if somehow it was still in Gregor's apartment, if he hadn't left it in the Yankee Kitchen or on the motorcycle... had he even had it then?

Shiny polished leather over thin strips of lean, bronze clasps, slight bulge at the base, all cheerfully greeting him when he flipped on the light. The door was still unlocked, a tripwire with cans that jangled as it opened alerted Yuri to his entry. He apologized, paused looking at the cupboard where Gregor's gear was, decided that he couldn't call two and half months "as good as six", and that some rules were too good to throw out even now, and fled back to the concrete submarine. It crossed his mind that it was already night-time, although the brilliant splash of orange light that reflected off the dull brown clouds that had snuck up on the city as the day had slipped by made it seem day-like.

Back in the claustrophobic safety of his office, steel shades drawn over the glass partitions, he undid the clasps and opened the bag. Three brown-paper wrapped packages still sat there, each containing an ingot of gold, a small black shortwave, and a letter that said "Do Not Open" with a page of blank lemon stained ink hidden inside in case it was opened out of passing fancy. Also there was an illegal handgun, untraceable, and characteristically crude. It had seven chambers, an auspicious number, and a mostly working silencer. Bullets were precious and getting preciouiser, so there was a little bag with them too. He also had a bottle of the finest Croat Sljivovica, two Cuban cigars, a dime bag of various semi-medicinal pharmaceuticals, a sanded glass pebble he had been given a lifetime ago, and a plain wood cross. Any port in a storm. He sighed, considered opening the bottle, but instead took out the gun and the bullets, loaded it carefully, and then put it inside the enormous sleeve space he had. Then he pulled up airforce records and the National Criminal Registrar server, and set to work.

Mr. O. Herwig Leist was not a particularly stable man by all accounts, and having spent lots of time in the basement of the Technical Operations section of the Naval Intelligence/SouthEast building had not improved that. Gregor had a penchant for taking in misfits, out of it had always seemed to Jo, a sense of genuine pity. Oz did not inspire pity, being convinced that firstly Paganism was blatant heresy and leading the nation astray, and also that he personally was a tool of the Lord. Before winding up in the the constantly lit fluorescent lab below the river, he had been a *Seebattalion landser*, a riverboat man really, out of Fort Saint Michael, and seemed to feel that he was justified in defending the homeland against asiatic fanatics. Not a popular line these days. After an incident which involved shooting at a man for putting up the ubiquitous life-runes over a grave, his outdoors activity had been curtailed, and

Gregor had decided to try to undo the years of lysergic therapy that he himself had initially conducted in pursuit of less venal and earthly agents who would not be bought off. Whether or not he was stable, he was certainly fervently willing to kill pagan hierophants like Fleischhauer, and years of training left him capable of the job. As he had never officially been charged with anything, simply Section 8 destined for T4, vanished from the rolls, there was nothing improper about opening a door to a formally empty room. God alone knew where he had gotten the gun.

He had a quick conversation, though, to make sure that this wasn't something he had been programmed to do- although you couldn't know that these days- that he was the programmer in the room. If he was going to have a cupbearer carry his cup, he better make sure it wasn't someone else pushing poison into his own chalice. The man had skin so pale it was almost translucent, and you could see veins of blue copper running through his temples. Leist was cuffed, steel links binding him to a cold steel table, everything as surgical as a euthanasia lab, intentionally evocative. "Mr. Leist. Coffee?" He offered a paper cup, pushed it towards the shackle. "It's been a while." The man rasped. His teeth were yellowed and thick with plaque. "Haven't seen you before." "New post. Checking on our residents." Forcing causal, oblivious, careless- hopefully hiding intent. "You'd be happy to know that a Mr. Fleischhauer is giving a great ceremony today." There was a clang as the man seemed to strain his thin arms against the steel chain, like a dog. "You've probably heard of his father in-law, the one who helped introduce the psychological hardening tactics for our troops." Leist swished the cup quickly. Jo pushed the other cup towards him. "You seem like you haven't had coffee in a while. Take mine." Leist eyed him shrewdly. "You know, the- what is it for you *landsers*, killing your service dogs. Right about this time of year, midwinter, right?" Leist looked down at the cup of coffee and seemed to strain against the steel, ribbons of red glistening against the cuffs. "Probably the only thing you ever killed. Not much of a soldier." Leist let out a snarl. "If you ask me, it's barbaric, but that's the bigwigs, the Fleischhauers of the world. He moved his finger under his jacket pocket and thumbed a red button. From the closed PA system in a room, the voice of an angel- a hooker outside of Lindemann's apartment actually, spoke, slightly charged, slightly erotic. "It's got to be done. Shoot your shot, soldier of god." Leist looked up. Jo stared straight ahead. "Did you hear that?" Leist rasped. "Hear what?" Leist drained the second cup. Enough pervitin to kill a dog, enough to keep the tool sharp. "Well, you seem comfortable enough wasting your life away in here. I won't bother you. Someday the homeland might call you. Got others to visit now." He fumbled in his pocket for a cigarette- paused, passed one to Leist "For the season. Happy midwinter." and as he fumbled for the lighter, very absorbed in the mess of his pocket, he let a silver flash slip across the table. Leist darted on it, making fists of his hands. Jo made as if to search again, get the man's heart racing, build tension. A delicate dance. He lit Leist's cigarette. "If only you could make it down to the grove today. Sure to be many dogs cut up down there. A new batch of recruits made hard and bloody, eh?" He smiled, turned crisply, and forgot to lock the door. Just a clumsy new officer. Down the hall, someone had left a gunlocker open- but Jo had to make sure there were just enough bullets, three or four, no more, and then he returned upstairs to the daylight world where a thin film of snow was just beginning to fall.

It made quite the sight, although it wouldn't be until after he unclenched his stomach with a couple of drinks of the clear plum brandy that he was able to take the majesty of the memory in. It had been a foot parade of four thousand and four

hundred, many intoxicated and half naked in the dying december sun, marching and drumming down the coast road towards the efflux of the river where the sea and the land met in a salty delta scrub, towards the astroturfed sacred grove of cedar. Public marches had a long tradition, as did their patronage by scrupulous or otherwise donors, and Alfred Fleischhauer had always had a flair for them. He was streaked red with the blood of a lamb “Let the Jew God strike a German Man on the weakest day of our Sun-King!” he had cried out, before leading the romp. The prisoners were bound at the back of the train, guarded by actual Order Policemen- there had been escape attempts which the round bellied businessmen dressed in mink coats and buffalo hide had been unequipped to handle- until they would be turned over for a hanging from the boughs of cedar. Usually, it was yew or ash, but given the humid summers and the soil, the donors decided that Cedar was a less frequently replaced investment. Once raised up, they’d be butchered by the crowd as they died, supposedly to ensure the magic vitality of the mystic racial brotherhood. Or the purity of it? It was hard to tell- the unstructured orgy of violence that ensued in the grove was *unstructured*. Of course, the three pistol shoots that rang out from a halted rickshaw cab were unstructuring in themselves- two hit bystanders in ways that would maim, but the first had already gone into Fleischhauer, above the thick black leather bearhide shirt, with it’s necklace of claws, below the deer horns woven into a deerhide hat that towered like a beehive or babylonian construction. “Babylon has fallen! Long live the Eternal Church!” the rickshaw screamed out before being set upon by the crowd. The OrPo rushed forward to try and contain it enough that they’d get a chance with the bastard alone in a jail, leaving the prisoners unguarded for a moment, long enough for a man with a flat mat of gelled hair and a wide, curling, beard to cut their ropes and motion them into an alleyway where a Naval Intelligence van was waiting.

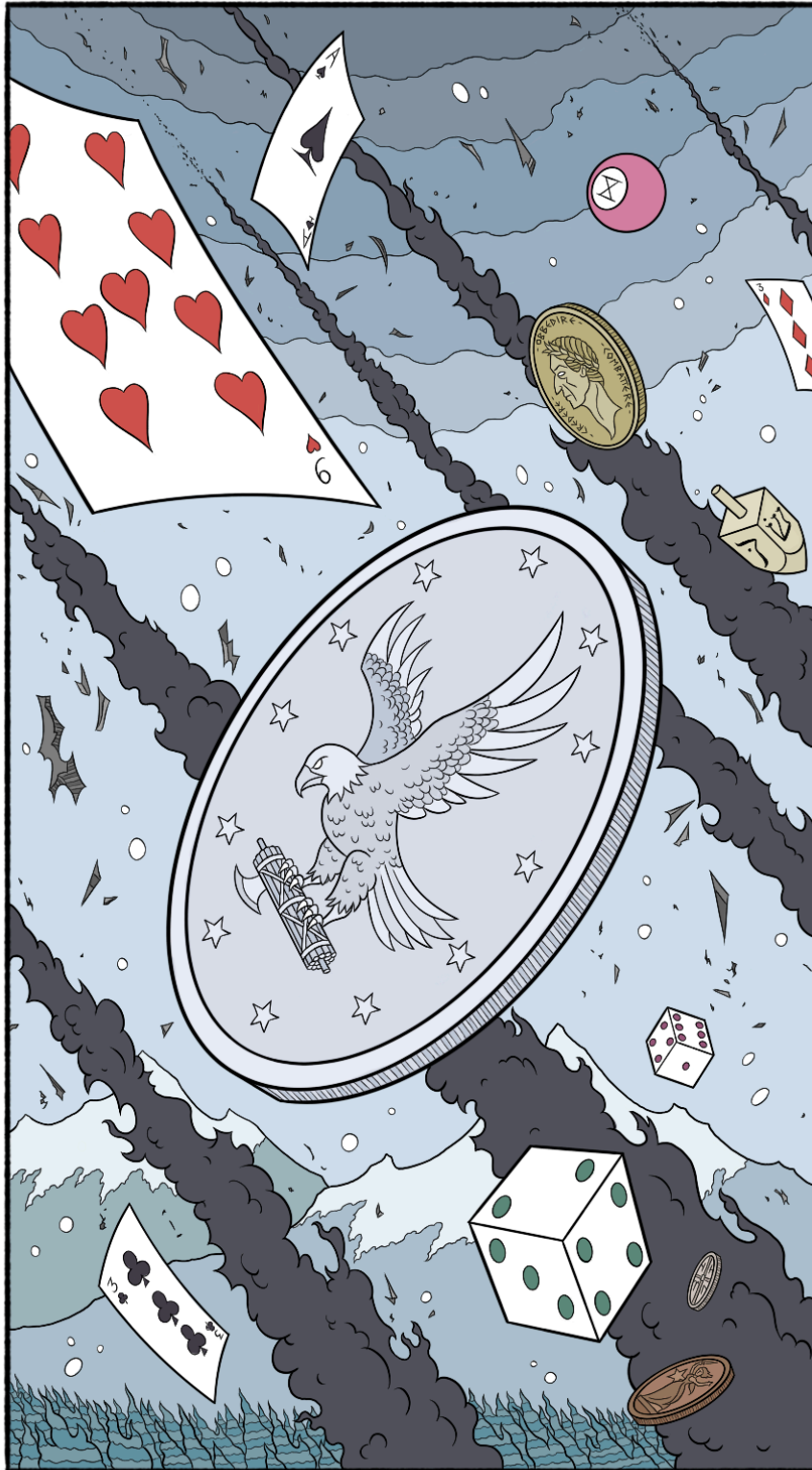
Fleischhauer wasn’t from Khanstadt- he had been bought there by the business asatru community for the holiday- neither was Leist for that matter. The earliest dusk of the year, and the rapidly emptying bottle of Sljivovica mixed with heady fumes of the cigars and the hemp smoke that Yuri passed out to the saved men. The whole thing was bathed in fumes of unreality. This was the biggest political hit in a *long* time and he had just pulled it off, without too much implicating him. It had been Jueress, who would soon find himself under the bus, charged with clearing out the expensive basement cells who had signed for Leist’s confinement. There weren’t any cameras down there. They weren’t a team of fucking plumbers after all, they were a professional naval outfit. He could hardly sell out a supervisor for the decision he had chosen to make without explicit command, although he would no doubt try. The SS would be thrown into chaos by this humiliation, and mixed with the game of musical chairs in the North-East, they’d at least put off their arrest until the fifteenth. That would be enough for him and the gang of slaves he now had to make use of the real asset behind the hit.

Johannes Kaasch was from New Saxony in the Carpathian foothills, grandson of some people who had settled there when it was still almost a frontier and the name of Otto von Waechter was on everyone’s lips as a brilliant manager of the natural eastward movement of the race. He had spent his childhood learning from slaves at the local lumbermill where he worked as a clerk how to play the balalaika, learning then techniques he would decades popularize in private but infamous songs extolling the tragic fate and heroic nature of the Jews. This made him extremely controversial, especially with the police who rather happily received him from the Security Service on charges of drug running. Of course, the reason he was infamous is that he had been a

pilot on the long-range supersonic patrol bombers over the arctic circle, and the people he had played for included other airforce personnel. That sort of thing was beyond the pale of good taste, so when they had found that he had excess aviation stimulant on him after a flight, it was off to the brig. Due to a complicated series of vendettas involving Galicians and some of the Worthergau people at the top of the National Prison system, he had wound up in Khanstadt where he became a natural target for the Southeastern airforce to turn into a sacrificial plan. But men who can land large supersonic aircraft did not grow on trees (nor did they, no matter their offense, belong there) and so the rather unchristian action of a public execution had been exchanged for the unchristian act of assassination. Any port in a storm. He took another swig from the glass bottle.

The long night of Yule settled in over the city, chaotic rivers of blood and rage and celebration in the streets, the sound of the glass breaking in church windows and of roaring coal fires beneath the great steel pistons as families, drunk groups of workers in their single dormitories, parties in the coastal mansions of the mega rich, fireworks launched from the bridges of the swarm of cargo ships, thousands of gallons of brandy and wine, meat roasting, heat from the coal fires, the thrumming of the engine in the transport truck as it raced to the newly vacant and unobserved psychotic acid stained cells of the yellow concrete submarine, the relieved chatter of men who had almost died, the dignified silence of Yuri as he drove, the swish of the alcohol against the glass bottle, far to the north the winter sun had set for good, maybe his father in the fort alone was taking final breathes, elsewhere, busy men in black-and-silver uniforms trying to link him to the stroke that had rendered him unto euthanasia, Fleischhauers body collapsing as big spurts of wine-red blood poured out from him matting onto the fur of some bear he had bought, was this his life? Alone on Yule, no family at all now, no love, no future, just a face on a list of missing and dead failures hiding at the fringe of society, but in the background there was the chatter of men who were still alive, willing to keep breathing against the persecution that surrounded them, and then the swish of alcohol again the bottle, emptier and emptier, he should speak, "Well, how about that boys? Want to go somewhere worse?" and already dreams of freeing wives and of carving out new lives in the frontier beyond the rule of the noose, it would take planning, and time, to steal a jet, but he was a *Commodore* wasn't he, alcohol and all, and he had killed a political foe, that was... well, it wasn't as if you could go to hell twice, and, and, and, but already the cigar was choking under the ash, the warm ember promise fading to black....

9: Iron Dice, Rolling



My dear friend, Commodore-on-Land, Arnie Weorsaske, I must write to you asking forgiveness. Here in The City things haven't gone as I would have liked. If you remember Lindemann from the NavIntCon a decade ago, kind of wet behind the ears, a real *seaman's* seaman, he was dead on my arrival. At first I figured that it was a simple crime of passion, given his predilections, however I am thrown into doubt on all sides. I have had to engage the Security Staff on several occasions, and now find myself increasingly treated as a *de facto* outlaw in their quarters. Perhaps I will find myself *de jure* wanted quite soon. In that case, this note in the hands of a reliable man tapped by a certain von Waldmueller, will be delivered to you, which is how you have come to read it. I plan, no doubt as you will have learned, to seize advantage of the confusion of the late GG's death (God Rest the Old Man- I'll process that later). My goal is the great hydroplane base South-East, where I have a man familiar with the place and the equipment for a mad dash North. Evidently I am powerless to disrupt the deep functioning of the state. In all honesty, I now feel powerless to disrupt anything but my liver. In short, my target is the StratCom North-East, Fort-St-Michaelsberg. If I cannot find a way to properly speak my mind, let alone convince this god-damned people, I will have to force their hand. Nothing less than immediate manumission, land grants and full rights for the wretched and dispossessed will begin to address the mortal sins we all have around our necks. As a former acquaintance you will no doubt fall under suspicions- I hope that my actions will allay that, but wish you godspeed and full wind in any case. Truly you have been a rock and a friend for me. Faithfully yours in the name of righteous struggle- Admr. J.F. Wenschler

The whine of the engine had vanished into the night, and the still silence woke him. High in the night the steel bird slowed, the mouth-engines no longer greedily sucked at the air, gravity returned as the dominant force, the wheel turned to crush them from the pinnacle they had achieved. Kaasch called out from his seat "Winter gale had some lightning up here, we must have been unlucky, eh? Struck down so high, we can still head out for the mountains folks, expect turbulence alright?" They looked back and forth in the dark of the cargo bay, the single red light flickering over the desk. It had taken them hours to plot a long loop up to Fort Saint Michael, and would let the escapees flee with the plane after delivering him to his new post. He would take charge and hold down the fort until the Spring thaw hit the country. Hopefully. But they must have flown too high, too close to the raging gales that swept down along the mountains before the winds turned off across the plains to draw their icy tears in the land. With every gust, the bird shivered, taugth and turning, and now always heading down. Yuri Ivanovich, still bandaged at the forehead, mentioned a major landing strip that was rumored to sit somewhere just beyond the mountains, a sure goal to head towards. Kaasch popped out a small square tablet from some foil, burst the seal with his long nail, and then held it to his nose. He looked back at Jo who was trying to decide whether staring grimly at the pilot, or grimly at the sky was worse. Grinning his his uneven smile the pilot said "Just a bit of the old pervitin for the home stretch hoss, we'll get there just fine" but whatever reassurance the maniac

hoped to convey came too late- Jo was already bent into the corner of the cabin, venting his sick stomach across the metal frame.

The old day had already died and the sun must have been hiding somewhere over the mountains when they broke the clouds and saw the ground. They had dropped 10,000 meters in 10 minutes probably, but their precarious fall seemed to stretch through hours. Kaasch had almost been right- the wide wings and their immense altitude had almost gotten them over the mountains. The sun had risen with a warm red glow across the bleak snowscape, interrupted only by the hints of black firs half buried, dark rock faces snuggled into their frost blankets, and the gleaming mirrors of ice where lakes had been. From the map, they were only about 80 miles from the closest city, but the strong North-Easter vortex had pushed them twice as far south as they had aimed. The silver bird seemed to skim one ridge, heading towards a valley. As Kaasch saw the big peak rise up in front of them, he pushed for a snap “Hoss, aim for the peak and try to get over it, or settle into the valley?” and Jo, at a loss regarding the finer points of mountaineering and aviation, but very keenly aware of the height of the looming mountain, called for a glide along the frozen river at the valley bottom. The steel skin was a sparkling diamond, scattering the first rays of sun about, a chariot of flame skimming closer and closer to the tops of the trees along the southbound river. Up ahead there seemed to be a thin curl of smoke just along the trees that sprang around the polished snake of ice that wound through the land, a wisp of smoke that seemed to get closer and closer until- a great snap rang out and the plane seemed to freeze, his heart stood still, his blood stuck in a pounding vibration without flowing and then a giant wave hammered the world and it flickered out.

They couldn't have had more than ten guns between them but the crackle of gunfire was loud everywhere. “Fuck” Jo whispered, pulling himself out of the mess of gear that had secreted away. As he pulled a salted beef shank out from behind him and wound up more tangled in a thick tan blanket he smacked his tender head into what might have been a hip. “Yuri? Vasili? Mikhail? Who the fuck is that?” he called, looking more for a sign of life than an unlucky party to blame. The weight shifted, started cursing in the mongrel tongue it knew best, and then asked more plainly “who the hell is shooting at us?” The zip-zip-zip, cracking, whipping bursts of sounds were only accelerating. But there were no pings of metal, so whoever was firing had no idea how to hit the broadside of a cargo plane. Jo swam through some more bundles of fabric and food, hit the edge of what had once been the tail of the plane, and started feeling the hull (or whatever flyboys called it) for the emergency hatch. His boot managed to hit the handle before his hand, and Lady Luck was generous enough to have broken the mechanism, so the whole side of the tail spilled him out, followed by a cascade of dry sausage and canvas. His pistol was out and firing before his face buried itself in the snow. Someone else spilled out onto him, rolled off, started squeezing off a gun burst, and then laughed with a booming voice.

Lady Luck must have had a special eye for the group because the crash ended miraculously well. Everyone but poor Semyon (who had been shredded when the plane tore) was fully intact, barring a bruise or a small cut, none the worse for wear. The lack of straps in the cargo hold meant that the whole cast was tossed into the jumbled mountain of blankets, vegetables, meat and even the odd downy pillow. Even the crates of liquor, packed with straw, had survived. Kaasch, in the cabin (with the one intact wing still attached) had been catapulted past several conifer trees into a

feathery mound of snow, and although he began complaining immediately about the powder that had stuffed his shirt and melted into his jacket, was almost untouched despite having been catapulted through a glass window. Even the gunfire that had peppered their landing was nothing so serious. When the wing had clipped a tree and been pulled off the frame, it sent the fuel twirling out black blots across the white canvas, igniting fires when the big metal wing sparked somewhere. The little blazes must have heated the birch and pine trees just enough to make their vessels pop, bursting the trees with deadly effect on the forest- and providing a huge amount of downed timber for fires and shelters.

They set up their tents, resting on the fallen boughs, around the back half of the plane which sat vertically, held up by a swaying stand of firs. They had moved fast to bring the little fires together on the limbs of trees, keeping them out away from the fanning needles which carried enough snow to extinguish the life giving heat. No freezing alone here. They crouched together around the blaze, taking turns gathering the remains of the trees, so wise to grow here, drying shirts that had soaked up too much of the snow, even putting cuts of the salt meats around the fire. The aroma, bitter and arid from the crackling birch and pine, salty and rich from the roasting fat, spiced with the intoxicating wisps of exotic hydrocarbons left from the crash, said that even in this ferocious cold, some gambles worked out. Well, sort of. They started taking stock of their situation. They had guns, food, and shelter. But they were also 80 miles from anyone else with food, in the dead of winter, surrounded by bitter cold and tall snow drift. If they didn't trek out and the game was sparse, they might end up at more of a personally acquainted dinner party than anyone would have liked. On the other hand, trekking on foot through the forests and over the great peaks was no joke. Worse yet, Kaasch said that he suspected there were strange doings behind the peak on account of runs old airforce pilots talked about with "special" munitions- and that the mountain had seemed to glow a little too much even before the illumination of the sun. Another spin of a roulette wheel it seemed- and no matter how warm their hands were now, no telling when the winds would blow too cold even for their odds.

With the heat of the flames close, and the frigid legs of fate still closed, the red men decided to bury what was left of their recently departed Semyon, who they praised in glowing terms as a martyr "who will live ten thousand years longer than any Master" who had died "tasting the winds of freedom" which Jo had to pretend not to hear. The body itself was each half pitiful and very small and pale above the jagged crimson tears which had rent the soul free from the sad mortal coil. Having known Semyon only as a quite dark shape for only two hours, Jo had little to say of the man, whose mangled face seemed dour and rather unhappy at having been left out of the miracle of the crash. Jo pulled a small brown cigar out of his pocket and bent into the fire to light it, before delicately suggesting in between puffs of smoke, that the body should be burned. "What, so you huns can fertilize this valley too?" a dark and stout "Ivan" growled. The whole group of Reds turned towards him looking unpleasant and with arms drifting muscle tick by muscle tick to the handles of their guns. Josia raised his arms. "I mean no disrespect to the honorable soldier, but there are wolves and savage things out in the cold, and I don't see any shovels around here. What else can you do?" But this did not break the tension. Ivan spat, and then pulled out a thick knife from his belt. "Okay Fritz-pig, if you're so touched by Semyon why don't you chisel him deep with this? Don't want any fucking wolves to scare you." Yuri nodded along with the other men, and Kaasch stood motionless.

The old man had always said that he sat back from politics and stuck to soldiering from midnight to noon and back again, because that was where he belonged. When he had been touring the frontier for the first time, Jo had found that silly- if you wanted something, you had to take it, and if you put up with things like this you weakened your own hand. Staring at the lean and cold faces of the men who were escaping hell, though, he realized that he had misplayed. It was time to advance away from the old front. "Where would the valiant Semyon like to lie? Under the shade of a pine? By the frozen river?" Ivan, who was still sore, eyes red from smoke and ash, looked across the fire. "What's the problem fritzy-pig? Or don't you know that our dear friend would have liked nothing more than to rest on the tall mountain peak, gazing for eternity as the sun rose across the unshackled land? Get moving, fuck" but now Ivan had overplayed his hand, and Yuri put an arm around his shoulders. "I'm sure our new Comrade sees his error and is willing to work to correct it. And we can't afford to lose him in some avalanche. I think Semyon would be happy to go free into the earth anywhere, instead of an infernal kiln."

Those words echoed in his head as he scraped the snow from the earth underneath the shelter of a monstrous evergreen. He was overwhelmed by shame at his attitude to the dead man, at his thoughtless comment, and the layers of ash that had streamed across a continent. How could he have forgotten the greasy gray stain left in his hair, in his eyes, on every patch of clothing? How could he? Could they ever be washed out? Would the waves of sweat, the puss from the breaking blisters that dripped and then froze into the soil which he pried out, chunk by chunk, straining his shoulders. The thick steel knife, did it bend as he scraped the shallow pit deeper inch by inch? Like a man possessed he pressed on, even as his own blood trickled into the soil, freezing black in the black, brown in the brown, inch after inch and ounce after ounce. It must have been a frenzied hour before he checked the depth. Only six inches- not six feet. His face was red and streaming with sweat that the cold dry air pulled at. His muscles burned, and his fingers felt stiffer and stiffer, but he kept pushing. By the time his bloody knuckles were grinding against the frost gelled ground a foot below the surface, his whole body was feverish and shaking. He was losing control, to be in a mania like this. He slowed, gulped in the frigid air, wiping at his face. Blood, probably from his nose, mixed with the sweat on his wrist. Yuri walked over, looked at the pitiful tomb, nodded. Jo looked up, and saw that the others had been busy carrying rocks from the river side over, forming a cairn. "That's enough I reckon, with the rocks we brought. No wolves will be getting to Semyon in there. He can sleep in peace, or sit and dance, and we'll leave him a bottle of the good stuff and beef for the long nights." No sweet liberty, no carefree redemption, but a small victory still he figured. He nodded, picked up his coat, returned the knife to Ivan, and went to huddle by the fire to dry.

One by one the men walked over and placed a piece of rock- mostly a flat gray color which glittered slightly in the light of the sun. By the time the man had been covered by layers of rocks, frozen earth, and pine boughs, the light was long and the shadows deepening. Slowly, they drew back from the shallow grave towards the fire and the tents and the salt meat and roasting vegetables and cold liquor. Ivan stood the longest staring deeply at the grave, and Jo wondered if they had a special connection, or if Ivan was simply trying to send a message to him. It seemed that his gambit had succeeded- the men had been impressed or disturbed by his frenzy, and decided that tolerance was the best policy for something volatile or impressive. Either way, the basis for mutual life had been laid and only a little blood shed. He stuck to drinking

boiled snow and eating meat- although teetotaling might jeopardize his manliness he gestured enough with his steel water tin that no real pressure came. Well, not at first- Vasili (were there two in the group?) had found a stick with some crystalline residue, which Jo took to be a salt lick. Alexander, who had been lucky enough to do a little hunting back on the plantations, agreed, and so they shaved off a crystal into the tin to sample dilutely. Jo confirmed it was salt, but this drew Ivan's drunken attention.

"Fritzy," he started, politely dropping the "pig", "drink with us. What are you some tightfisted prick, too good to drink alcohol with us? Here" he held out one of the long glass bottles, uncorked. There was almost an audible silence, and the moonless cold of the night sank in around them little band. He felt ill. Drink? Could he trust himself? He wanted to- he had gone months with no drinks, subsisting on water and that acidic rotten milk (OK- it had grown on him), but he knew that "rewarding" sobriety with a drink was- well it just seemed unsound. He gazed into the bottle, the fire and the stars reflecting and refracting through the clear grain alcohol. Was there any way out without offending Ivan? Anyway... "Watch. I'm taking the first watch, Ivan, you don't want me drunk out there" but this masterstroke wasn't enough for the brute persistence "C'mon fritzy, a little drink to warm you up, keep you going through your two hours on the post." Two hours? These men must have studied the watches at the camps then, they must have actually done a little training. Maybe even a little banditry. Maybe Alexei wasn't the only one who had "hunted". His eyes flickered over to Yuri- but the man's face sat as impassive as carved stone, an old god facing the flickering red light of the embers. He looked Ivan dead in his glazed-over eyes, grabbed the bottle's base with his scabby hand, tilted the long neck up to his lips, and tipped it back. The liquor smelled foul- bad copper and yeast, and whatever else came through its first distilling. It tasted worse, burning and making him gag as he held the bottle up, one gulp, two gulps, three- the level of the liquid had dropped precariously low by the time he tilted it away and handed it back to a now grinning Ivan. Jo belched fumes, howled, and told himself that he had enough fat and starch from the meat and charred potatoes that he would be fine. Unfortunately, just as he was starting to really appreciate the warmth of the fire, and the softness of the bed roll in the little lean too facing it, the bottle was swinging around the circle again. "Welll," he said with not too much of a slur, "I'd better be getting up the tree," gesturing with an outrageous fist behind him, and make suuure no wolves, or tigers, or bears are sneaking up on you all" was it clear he was feeling the liquor? It was much stronger, maybe twice as strong as he had thought at first. He needed to get out to fresh air, away from it. But the men at the camp were fixated on something else. Kaasch, very socially lubricated by now, was rummaging for his lucky guitar, which he explained "had traveled through every ve-hicle crash I've ever had, and never even broke a string" and somewhat bitter at the timing and the lack of attention, Jo, climbed up the tree to about 15 feet. Far enough away to miss the heat- but also avoid the bottle. He breathed in the cold night air, and then wrapped a scarf around his nose when it started to sting. The night was quiet aside from the crinkling of the coals and fresh wood. It was cold, but not cold enough for the ice to really sing like it did in the extreme north. The stars were bright and felt warmer than usually as they beamed through the cold winter silence. He picked out the familiar ones, the bears and the queens, and even the old warrior and his faithful hound- maybe the old man was watching over him in some way from out there. Maybe. After considering this dubious proposition, and wrapping himself in the coat, the coarse honey of Kaasch's voice started filtering in over sonorous chords.

A sharp howl broke the cold air. Orion, who had only just been peering above the mountain, was now standing in full height above the western ridge. Had he dozed off for so long? Another howl, this one closer, pierced the stillness, and raised his hairs. He shuddered in the cold, and moved his toes which had been trapped dangerously in his boots. They felt numb and slow to move, but they still felt- too much luck for all the mistakes. Men played with less fire in the mountains and still died. He shook his limbs, and then climbed down the tree to wake Ivan. He figured the man would be in a drunken stupor, but his eyes snapped open quickly and he jerked fast from the warmth of the bed rolls. The fire had sizzled into embers, black and cherry red like some distorted mirror of the sky, dark but stained with brilliant stars of a hundred colors. As Ivan tied his boots, Jo offered him the great coat, stacked a couple of logs at the center of the coals, and started undoing his laces. The big rounds of wood took a minute to warm, but as Jo buried himself in the bed roll, feeling that cool freshness that his body would slowly replace with it's own warmth, flames were licking their way up the logs. Not even the howls of the wolfpacks in the moonless night slowed his descent into sleep.

He was half awake, dozing in and out with each breath, trying to hold onto the warmth of the bedroll and the blankets, delay that harsh exit into the cold dawn, when the shout came. There had been a tell-tale clank preceding it, and then a crisp German voice called out "Hail there, whose camp is this? Permission to enter?" and then a pause, "Hallo?" Jo had rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, was fumbling to tie on the boots which he had kept warm by his chest during the night, fish around for his coat with all the braid and insignia he might need to talk his way out of whatever this one would be, when the steel that had clanged an alert so recently lodged itself at his forehead, accompanied with the gruff voice "take a seat chappie".

Like shadows in the early dawn, men with guns stepped out from behind the trees, warily approaching with the cold steel raised. They were a motley crew, dressed in tan leather and fur, sheepskin, gray cotton, black leather, painted silks, and all with fur masks covering their faces. The tan animal skin broke around the nose and the eyes, and the white and rust furs poked through the gaps. The man who had spoken first egan "What are you laddies doing out all alone in the woods? This time of year it gets awful cold in these hills". The men stood around slackjawed, and just as Jo was beginning to feel the pressure to say something despite the gun at his head. Fortunately Kaasch and his big mouth shook their sleep away and broke out "Well hoss, it's like this. We had acquired this plane over here- or what's left of 'er, but a great storm from the heavens blew us into these hills. I figure we don't even know rightly where we are, even if we know where some of us ought to be." There was silence. Then Ivan spoke out asking if the men had heard of the famous Yuri Ivanovich "Who hasn't heard of that man-or dreamed of finding that so notorious a prize could have a bounty attached? Wouldn't that be something". Everyone began to twitch their hands towards an inevitable massacre, fingers inching down blankets, holsters eeking out from the snow. The tension, like a clock hand springing out towards the noon toll, like a dice tumbling until the face was revealed, and then one of the men in buckskin and feathers chuckled. "But Yuri Ivanovich is that famous Soldatsky brother, out in the farmlands. He'd never last a night in the mountains. Whatever your business is my brothers, I'm sure you have something worth the fuel and food to keep yourselves alive for trade". Hands dropped, and guns took a rest. The coffee that had been

stashed in the plane was broken out and snow sent to boil on the reviving fire from the night.

The men began to introduce themselves- Jo as an officer of Naval supply looking to unload some materials out here in exchange for information, and the others, well they were his trustworthy porters of course. The red escapees all rotated names, one to the left, Yuri becoming Vasili, Vasili becoming Ivan, Ivan becoming Nikol, and so on until the round finished. The men claimed to be hunters looking for the natural riches- not the wolverine pelts that they carried, but they claimed, they maintained a monopoly on the gold that they hoped to find in the rivers. It was a mix of languages, sharp and smooth, faces pale as snow or yellow as cream, eyes of all colors, a great mix of men. Some had been drawn up from their herds on the plains below, chasing the gold. Others had been drawn to the area from the wastes to the north, sick of scrounging the nests of woodrats and woodsnakes for eggs and roots. There was even a pair of Germans who sat in quiet silence, a Scotch, and a man who claimed to have been a magician and performer of lightshows in Paris before a tryst drove him to the far corners of the earth. This queer group sent the man (the others muttered that he was a Swiss who had run out of gold in his home mountains, moonlighting in a dead man's magic lantern cart) to fetch the sleigh. They had big dogs carrying their supplies- although the sleds themselves were empty. "We saw the smoke yesterday, and decided to risk the cold for it," one of the men said with an accent thick and high, which Jo took as some kind of Turkish. Jo nodded, thanking them, and offering liquor and maybe a look at their other wares when they reached whatever camp the men had come from.

Down by the riverside, the snow was thinner, and crisp, and they made good time as they followed the meander as it merged with its twin, curving below the base of the high white peak that dazzled the eyes with the reflecting sun. They started to pass fence posts and field markings, and something that passed for plowed dirt under the blanket of snow. How big was the camp to have fields? They saw as they pushed around the bend, that little cabins, maybe homesteads in the summer months, dotted the flat of the valley. Just beyond that, smoke rose- the wisps from the morning of the crash no doubt, the little detail wedged in his fatigued brain that hadn't quite clicked but had been hidden in all the exhaustion, a realization that was pleasing and disappointing in equal measure. The camp had only a couple hundred people total- women chasing men chasing gold, smiths heating their ore refineries in the hopes of getting their hands on anything around and working it in the winter before any of their city dwelling counterparts got the chance, dog keepers and carpenters all lagging behind the smaller groups of stupid or brave or hard or desperate men who dove into the rivers and blasted the mountains for the gold. There was even a saloon of some kind, where no doubt they could find warm beds for a crate of liquor. Lady Luck hadn't given up on them yet Jo reflected, with Yuri and the boys exploring their new freedom like children at play, Kaasch attempting to buy back liquor with some music, and card games, wood smoke, tobacco and coffee filling the long hours waiting for the thaws to come. But Jo couldn't burn his time like this, no, he had a plan to see through, whatever the hand might be he. His cause would play through, all in, always in. Time to recalibrate and figure out what good that briefcase might yet do.

10: The Patient Illuminator



In his dream the last of the eels was leaving, a dark river-within-a-river, leaving the man alone on the island with only chattering birds and coconut crabs for company. In his youth he had figured himself something of a loner, isolated and better suited to reading the signs of nature than the expressions of his family. In his middle age he had found himself tempted from his solitude at the edge of clearings, but never found himself truly feeling at home. Finally, he had allowed himself to slip further and further into isolation until one day he had grabbed his canoe and left all society behind him. He had let the current carry him, drifting with the little glass-head eels until he had drifted to this little island where a rocky peak with a spring sat above green bushes of birds where he had been able to plant his peppers, Yuca, Yautia, maize, everything he had brought with him as seeds to make this private life his own comfortable home. The sounds of the spring and the little river it made, the birds in the mist on the green, the rolling waves all around produced a trance as deep as the richest potion ever created by a herbalist. He had spent solar cycle after solar cycle there, enough moons that he had stopped counting, finally free from the stress of obligation and maneuvering of his town, kissing up to the bosses, entertaining bratty kids who couldn't hold their corn mash, fighting over the best spots for firewood. It never ended, until he had left. But for a moon, something else had gripped him, and now the eels, fully grown, heading back north sleek and green, were leaving him with the sounds in the mist.

One night, two full moons back, he had seen floating lights at night, like stars, but big and yellow and slow, bouncing along slowly across the horizon to the North, back towards Guanahani where he had spent most of his life. The eerie sight had vanished by the morning, but something about it had stuck with him. He had spent nights pondering it- what was it a sign of? What could cause stars to come so low and move like that? Then, one morning when he had been walking out of the midst towards the rocky peak of the spring hoping to steal some seabird eggs, he had seen them. Like big islands with tall trees and leathery wings, like a bat, there had been three of them. On the moving land he had seen strange silver creatures with long pointed heads and loose yellow skin moving around, and then he had seen his people, real people, all standing together in a group, and he had heard far in the distance, carried on the wind. Suddenly he had felt aware of his isolation, and he wondered- was that Guayuya and Liani from Guanahani? Were those young people those he had abandoned out of annoyance cycles back? The wind wept piteously, and something in his stomach sank. So for the past moon, he had felt something eating away at him, the silence of the waves not a joyous freedom, but an angry condemnation. As the last streaking eel vanished to the North, he wished he could follow them, wished he knew how they navigated the tough waves against the currents. Maybe he could give his canoe leathery wings and make it move so fast against the current, but he thought there were no bats or deer on the islands to make leather with. Every night he sat staring alone at the cooling fire, hot chili burning slowly in his stomach, and for the first time he could remember he wished he was not alone.

Outside the warm felt bedroll of the carriage the eyes of the dead rabbit that floated past were still open, staring lifelessly and seeing nothing. It hung, legs still limp, alongside 13 of its siblings, their white winter coats bearing the red marks of the snare and bludgeon that had brought it to this place. The two men, merrily singing a song of the frosty winter. It was an odd contrast- there had been a surreal thaw in the past week turning the frozen white landscape to a sparkle of greening plants and gushing melt. Gusts of warm air had flooded south from the plains following the bitter January winds from the Arctic Ocean, turning the frost to dew. It was still earlier in the day, but the sun was going down, making the raw rough wood facades of the town cast deep shadows against the orange sun. The trees in yards were actually starting to bud, and the sound of small animals- squirrels and birds and lucky rabbits- were heard scuttling around the bare mud of the vegetable plots that had been covered with

thick snow just days before. It bent his mind- midwinter, here in the freezing mountains at the far end of the wild, and it was a warm peaceful spring in a town not so different from one across the border! There was less electricity of course- shipping barrels by wagon and individual generators to burn it wasn't a recipe for neon lights. Still, the saloon stayed well lit late into the night, and the supply seemed to get Benoit by.

The Swiss set up the wagon every night aiming at the side of a volunteered house (he had seen him hang a sheet from posts where there weren't these obliging hewn pine boards), placed the big electric light gingerly facing it from its wagon mount, attached the single big speaker to the top of the wagon, and connected the whole great circuit to the big lead battery. Way out here, there was no digital library- they had to rely on old physical prints that the big lantern would run, which usually meant they were stuck with one of three films. The last one especially got rousing cheers out of the watching crowds. The crowds started off in dead silence and nervous trepidation, and they'd stay that way through half of the first film at least. In the more religious towns, where the big white washed churches with their sky blue domes stood unmolested by centuries of war and rot, the crowds stayed silent, as if they were gazing at an iconostasis and had not found a prayer to chant. Most places though, rapidly devolved into raucous, yelling and commenting and laughing. It might have turned the stiff lips of some bigwig at the capital, well it had even annoyed him at first, but hey- the people were there to enjoy the film, and out here at least this was how they did. Benoit usually loitered two or three days to allow word of the films to percolate into the little cabins and farms outside the tiny town centers here, enjoy the warmth and socialization of the communities, so different and shattered, but all united by the same underlying logic of frontier survival.

"Always popular, always poor" Benoit quipped in his clipping accent. Getting oil to charge the battery was the easy life, but it was pricey or impossible in most places on this side of the frontier line, so he had ingeniously installed a bicycle dynamo and a miniature home-made wind turbine from coffee cans to charge the damn battery. This meant that if it had been a still day in the air, Jo went into the wagon and peddled hard for his upkeep. Benoit was generous with the earnings though, and there was plenty for food and warmth inside the felt lined caravan box. They were paid, sometimes in kind with food or fuel or firewood, hay for the mules, or anything else. Tonight, as he grabbed his pipe and plugged in a cartridge of nicotine, puffing as it glew amber, one young lady who hadn't been at the film came up with a large basket of snowdrops. He wouldn't have guessed her to be more than 14, a real infant, but children grew slow in these hard hills. She seemed to be cheery for a child that age, none of the usual impetuousness (or was his impression too much of his own?) and curtsied low as she handed them the basket of the delicate white blossoms. "I have brought you these snowdrops to pay for my family- they think it will be as good as gold sir" It was a bizarre little gesture, the little flowers which had bloomed in the false spring, but they were delicate little things with their triplicate petals and sepals as white as fresh snow. They smelled too, of freshness and spring, and blossoming things which produced a great wave of anxiety in him as he gazed at them in the phosphorescent glare of the projected light in the early winter darkness, the air warm and rich with moisture. "Thank you ma'am" he said, a childish attempt at grave flattery, "but there is no need for payment if it cannot be made. You are welcome to see the shows freely." The girl laughed, surprisingly harsh and abrupt, "Oh sir, I do not think I can take a break from working to watch the films." and then a wicked gleam

snuck into her eyes “but I think my family could offer you sirs dinner if you stopped by our house, the one in orange with green posts at the North end of the town” He agreed, on the condition that the girl sneak away from her work and watch at least some of the films the next day. Benoit grumbled about the flowers being inedible of course, but Jo enjoyed the fragrance and the miracle of a spring blossom in the winter dark.

Then they made their way into the town, down the street which was sticky with mud but still mostly intact- unlike the fall there was no heavy traffic to tear the ground up. The saloon had slatted thick oak doors that swung easily in. The big expensive stone fireplace that sat at the center of the back wall was big enough and hot enough to roast an Ox and kept the whole place warm in the coldest weather despite the cheap pine boards that made up the walls. Two long arches sprouted out from the chimney base, a stone plaza jutting out of the fire meant to hold a roasting spit, granite and concrete mixed together a real expensive luxury. The bartender, an old man who wore a bandana over half his face like some fantastic pirate from a movie, saw them come in and poured them little brown glazed glasses of some liquor. He nodded in silence. Jo was never sure how they would take him. Benoit had the advantage of being Swiss- German, Italian, or French depending on the company he kept. Here he was from Geneva, smuggling new media mostly from Italy out to the rest of the world. Jo didn't have his dress uniform on, keeping a sheepskin pullover poncho around his neck with the greatcloak underneath, but his polished leather boots and harsh accent marked him for what he was. No escaping that. Surprisingly, most people out here didn't bother him, taking him for a stray or a runaway or maybe even a bandit, exempt from the sins that happened under the shadow of the eagle's wing. The bartender, for example might have burnt his face starting a fire- but at his age he could have had it burned when the bombs hit the big Steel town just beyond the mountains after the tanks and bombs it churned out year after year proved too annoying to tolerate, and the buildings to tempting a testing ground for the technicians to not test. He could also have had an eye burn out in some of the chemical attacks that had preceded the blow-up back home. Whatever it was, he served the strong drinks without a grudge.

Benoit took his drink down to a table where a card game was going and threw in. The worst vice of the film man was that he was too much of a Genevan calvinist to make a good card shark, never keeping an ace or two hidden away. Of course out here the cards were usually homemade. Further East and North there were paper mills hidden away that made cardstock- or maybe just exceptionally lucky hijackers of trains carrying cardstock from the West- but either way the cardstock had to be painted over by hand, so any hidden ace was liable to stick out like a sore thumb. Benoit never seemed to come out on top, but he hadn't ever bled out enough that they'd needed to run away from a town. Well, not in the two weeks they had been acquainted at least- it was the little mercies that you had to be thankful for. The drink had a slight off taste- like turpentine, whether from some lucky admixture or whatever ungodly barrels the yokels out here used. He slammed back two mugs full and then took the third to sit alone at a corner table looking into the fire. It was low, on account of the sudden thaw, so the embers were more prominent than they usually would have been in a roaring January fire. He sipped the cup slowly, savoring the pine tar flavor, and alternating it with pulls from a hand rolled cigarette. The real tobacco hit harder than the nicotine, maybe it was the tar or the Carbon Monoxide, but the taste- eugh, he could feel his tongue dying with every breath. Still, the buzz, if it was worth it or

not- how long did he really plan on living? Not enough to not smoke. Following the trend of that late great man, cigarettes had been banned in many places, but out on the fringes they were as free as the tobacco which grew like a weed in the well irrigated black plains. Of course it was those bans which had prompted the easy nicotine replacement, which he found quite pleasing in its own way- and also as a thumb in the nose of higher-ups. Now that he was a higher up, that excuse didn't fly, but then again he hadn't found the need to "excuse" any of his vices recently. Why the fuck not in times like this? He took another long sip from the cup, feeling the smoothness and hardness of the glaze, the occasional rough protrusion of a quick finish notwithstanding.

Maybe there had been turpentine, or maybe the pine sap flavor had just hidden how strong the drink was but he found himself dozing on the rough plank of the table as a sudden bustle and commotion broke out around him. Benoit! He jerked up, right hand flying to his left hip, sloppy like a soldier in a brawl. Quickly he saw that the object of the commotion was not Benoit, who seemed lost in zen-like meditation looking at his hand of red cards with their blue geometric lines. Rather a bull was standing, or maybe leaning propped up against the slatted doors at the front of the bar. But it must have been a dream- behind the bull, outside the doors, the quarter moon had been high in the sky when he walked into the bar- now everything was dark except for the gusts and drifts of white caught in the red firelight draining from the saloon. But no- it couldn't be a dream, there were cold blasts, icy air streaming in through the doorway. It didn't seem to be cooling the animated conversation of the people crowding around the bull. Damn the cold. He twisted his back to the left and right, and strode towards the doors to close them. As he got close to the bull he could see that it was dead, head lolling to the side, eyes starting to glaze and cloud. The men were having an animated conversation in the language that had been Yiddish, which mixed with the German and Russian and Bashkir and formed the lingua franca at this corner of the world. He could follow passably well, and it became apparent that the men were trying to sell the dead animal immediately and not only the price but the precise theology of how to butcher an animal that had evidently died in the sudden resurgence of the icy winds and snows. He didn't know the vagaries of who owed how much or what one of the men could drink in a year or how the animal should be bled, nor did he care. He was drunk and cold, and he had a gun. "Close the damn door and haggle inside" he said in what he imagined was a soft voice compared to the hard wind that was buffering him. No one even turned. He was reaching for his handgun when it struck him that it might not be a good idea to get snowed into a building with a group of people you were threatening with a gun. Sure, that's how the navy did it- but the navy flogged reds and rebels out of the ranks. Out here? They were all redskins of one kind or another. He moved his hand away, empty. Seeing as the bartender was busy haggling over the beef, he decided to sit back and accept his role- radical self-care by way of a warming glass of liquor.

By the time the second cup was working its way into his blood the bull was inside. The old bar man had brought buckets up and a long silver knife which used to bleed the animal. Someone had brought the butcher in the meantime, and he began the painstaking task of butchering the big animal. They did all this by the side door, close enough to the fire that they wouldn't freeze in the sudden cold, but also close enough that the overwhelming smell of blood and cow shit and splitting viscera saturated the saloon. The butcher, then men who had brought in the bull, the barkeep, a couple of his loyal patrons all gathered around with the butcher's steel and

got to work. It was about half an hour of bloody work before the hide was off. There seemed to be a lot of thick blood coming out everywhere, mostly on the floor, as the limbs were hacked off and the first big cuts of meat got put on the spit. The loose stuff got put into more buckets. The local butcher, who had been woken up and forced into the cold, didn't look happy with the compensation, but Jo guessed that a full hide and plenty of bones and some meat were worth a late night surprise shift. Once the white and red hunks of beef were starting to crackle and brown, replacing the sour iron-rich smell of blood with the delicious aroma of roasting fat and flesh. The barkeep was washing his hands in a water basin as Jo wandered back over to grab another glass. The old man sighed. "You know, son, I've seen my fair share of shit, everything your people threw at us. Disease, armored trains, fields on fire, mountains of dead livestock, cities turned into ash or flooded below whole lakes. Through it all, we survived; pushed back yes, but still here. This won't be the only animal that freezes tonight. That's how I haggled the herdsman down to just one month of drink, not a full year. And it was our prize breeder. Still, not as crazy as when a luftwaffe brigade bombed the place, and while we were fleeing, swept onto our animals and then made us buy 'em back. That was madness- we were expecting them with their shiny badges to finish what the fires had started, but they just yelled out a price in silver and beer" He shook his head as he dried his hands, still stained slightly pink, on a ragged cloth. "Can't hardly negotiate with the weather when it gets greedy though. The priests say to build potlatch societies for the judgment, the communists call for us to have faith, and the nationalists say we are being scourged for disbelief. What's an old pessimist to do?" Jo poured out a finger of a liquor, this one white and smooth with no pine aftertaste. He looked up blearily and said "you can start by pouring me another."

He woke up, his face branded by the knots in the wood of the barbench. He hadn't actually had that much to drink, all in all, he thought, but the long nights and the sudden shitty turn of the weather had depressed him. Huge slabs of beef were still sizzling brown, some turning a little gray from overcooking, but fatty and crispy all the same. He took his little silver dagger and cut a particularly blackened part off the spit- no sense in letting it go to waste- and started eating. The fat was immensely restorative to his stomach and he hardly felt sick at all. The half-faced barkeeper, up already, or at least freshly shaven, had a large kettle of coffee going. Overnight, the saloon had filled up- people, transient workers on farms, assistants to artisans, the odd miner or fur trapper, even a suspiciously sober man with a large oblong sack that could have held guns, all had filtered in through the night-time blizzard to find safety and warmth in numbers. The scent of cooking beef still overpowered the sleep-sweats of thirty unwashed men and their bedrolls and boots, but that situation was bound to end soon. Benoit was stirring at the poker table. The man was a natural early riser and a teetotaler. Perhaps he was an agent of some kind, under the effectively conspicuous cover of a Calvinist Genevan. He got up and peeked outside the main door, careful not to let too much of a breeze in. There were banks of snow piled up more than a foot, and the sky was still a gray slate against which the wind blew chalk dust puffs of snow. A cold wind blew down the streets, banging at the shutters of the buildings in their gaudy painted colors and raw pine boards, each in turn. He pulled his face in. The sheepskin poncho and the greatcoat had been almost uncomfortably hot in the mildness of yesterday, but the harsh return to reality reminded him of his absent gloves, felt liner, hat, and soft wool underclothes. He consoled himself saying "who brings an umbrella when skies are clear?" On the other hand it was the middle of January, and even in this changeable age, winters are cold.

Rambling again. He grabbed a handful of snow and rubbed it into his face. It was cold and rough and then burning liquid, which ah fuck, that did it. He turned around quickly, wiping his face on the sheepskin. At the bar the coffee, which was clearly Ersatz, sat steaming in the ceramic mugs, ready to go. As he was gulping like a fish, Benoit took the seat next to him and started sipping. "We will have to put skis on the wagon if we want to get out of this snow." No problem of course, that's how it had been before the thaw. There was something gnawing at him, something he had forgotten, hmmm, the case was in the wagon still, the tab had been covered by the films, what was it? Perhaps it was the unease of being snowed into a small frontier place like this, or snowed into the saloon itself. The men who moiled for whatever precious rocks or furs, or who farmed alone, all crowding in here with all this liquor- well they weren't savages he knew that, but it would be a damn fool who didn't believe that at least one of them had a life-grudge against all Germans, let alone an officer like him. There was something he was forgetting. He was lucky that his long boots were Navy fashion waterproof, no little leaks around the nails like an old army boot might have. His toes almost froze off in the walk through the fragile white mounds, but they stayed fairly dry. He and Benoit pulled the steel skis from their mounting on the roof, and then a long stream of mechanical instructions regarding wheels and bolts came. His specialization was electronics and signals, so it was all 'wrench' to him. He was standing up to brush some new flurry from the fur cap he had recently acquired when he saw snow sitting inside the wagon on his bedroll, and it clicked. He checked his watch- 14h, must have been a slow morning, hard to tell with the monotone pale gray of the sky, anyway he had time.

The sky had darkened by a few shades as he made his way down the main city street, through the slowly thickening snow. He patted his jacket pocket, checking one more time that the seemingly inexhaustible supply of brown cigarillos were still there. Now, at the threshold of the orange and red house, frosted with white crystal, he paused. Hemming and hawing to himself again- but there had been no film today, and it was an unexpected and extraordinary time with the big storm. Was it "ok" to knock, to invite himself in despite that earlier invitation? He shuffled, up and down on his heels, side to side in his stiffening boots. Maybe he should have smoked a bit before doing this, maybe he should have a drink and mull it over before walking into a situation like this? But that was a trap. Nothing for it but a temperate and calm smile, a knock or three, proffer the cigarillo offering and explain as clearly as possible that it was a return for the snowdrops. "Ah, but you must come in from the cold, kind man!" and then it was off with the coat, cap put on the hanger, stomp the snow off those boots, an awkward exchange of a handshake, then a hug with the man of the house- wait what was this, all crowding around him, the fruity smell of acetate that hung around after a shot of vodka, ahh he couldn't move his arms, was he being mugged but now they backed away, just a friendly drunk greeting from these curious bear-like people, not as professionally distant and polite as civil society. The family was all square shaped, boxy features, red skin and hair over rough wool clothing. Dull gray coats lined the entrance, but the rough fabric of the family was a sharp divide of white and black, angular lines and sharp turns woven into the cloth. Through the door sat a fire, which sat quietly, nary a crackle, as the flames slowly moved around a small log. The table they sat at was a fine construction- rounded smoothed corners of soft pale wood, a thick polished dark center. The chairs were simple pine shafts and laced twine seats, but it was surprisingly sturdy and comfortable when he sat in one of the proffered chairs. He and the burly man sat as the center of the table filled with bowls

of wood and painted red clay full of bread, pickled cabbage, and at the center, a huge masonry cupola full of steaming brown stew, checkered with floating white-and-brown chunks of potato, streamers of onion, and chunks of what were probably rabbit. It was as rich and warm and filling as the steam had hinted. The cabbage was crisp and sour and wet, and the bread was thick and somehow still warm.

As the bowls emptied and the clink of spoons slowed and then ceased, replaced by a mostly comfortable silence, the platters began to disappear. He searched out two more little cigars, bit them, and then light them in the fire, offering one to the solid bear of a man beside him. The man nodded, accepted the cigar, and puffed away in silence. Jo, mouth rich with the acrid smoke stewing with the traces of rabbit fat and sauerkraut, let out a content sigh. He could feel his eyes tiring, on account of the unstimulating gray of the day perhaps, and not even the fine smoke could keep him alert to the clumsy move that followed. The man, maybe he had introduced himself as ...Peter at the door, information lost in the rush of the family, turned smoothly around the axis of a bulging stomach and landed a straight blow of a fist into Jo's nose. He felt something crumple and then painfully snap, and felt a hot rush of something down into his beard. It took him half a heartbeat, but it felt like three, to react, reaching for his handgun, his trusty 9 at his side, but his right brushed air- there was nothing there... that crowded rush, all the hugging at the door, was this some kind of setup from the start? But the years of training promoted by the Reich from childhood, through the youth hikes and the teenage fights and the barracks and bars was there. The chair legs dipped themselves in the fire before the soft pine splintered across the back of the charging man, who with a scream of "Urrrah!" launched himself into Jo's overfull stomach, oh God he almost lost it, but he managed to brace his legs, swinging his hips with the turn, and then man sprawled head first into the wall, but Jo was off balance and slow from the food and the spiral of the turn turned itself into a sprawl of his own, and before he had overcome the potatoes in his stomach the man was up pummeling him, aiming blows at his face, but Jo had his arms up in time, shielding his nose, his eyes, anything, he needed time, tensing his thighs and hips and back as the man began to shout in broken German "Pavel! I be Pavel the Novgorod, Pavel son of Novgorod, son of Alexei Novgorod. Fuck you German, fuck you, fuck mother, fuck you for every building in Novgorod has burned, strike for building" but all this rage over some cesspit that had been part antiquarian graveyard part rail obstruction by the time Jo was born, bought him the time he needed to flex and strain muscles, left to right like pistons screaming against steel, flip the man up and over, stand up, pull away try to extract himself, make it to the coat stand, but there- the girl, the pale thin blonde one with the snow drops stood, malice cold as the snows in her eyes, coldness in the barrel of his steel companion aimed at him... Pavel was back on his feet charging again, but his eyes were searching there- wasn't this a good home at least, was there really no sympathy at the bottom of those pale blue eyes for him as a man? Was that covered by the sins- the murder and theft, the burning of cities and towns, forcing people into the wastes and mountains, all the many sins of his fathers? Was that all that was there? And then he slammed into the wall, a projectile launched by 100 kilos of raging grieving humanity.

He opened his eyes, eyelids covered in the dust and splinters of a thin screen. Above him gazed the weariest face he had ever seen. The eyes, narrowed against the sun in the olive dark face, the lined mouth betraying fatigue in it's terseness, all illuminated by the white glow of a halo, a white sun, and then below that like a mirror a white charger rose up, hooves ready to trample Jo, and a spear was raised in the

strong arms of the tired man. Did the words “In the name of the Holy Spirit” ring out only in his head, the last phrase a beast, a fascist pig, heard before it was pierced? The Saint peered through the oil, out from behind the screen, lance plunging towards one dragon or the other. Tears began to well, heat in the corner of his eyes. To die here, having fought so hard, enjoyed so much, failed so easily, here at the hands of this rude man below an icon? Now though, at the edge of his blurring vision, away from the saintly warrior, the dark shape of Pavel stopped, shrugged, and then offered a hand.

Pavel, son of Alexei, grandson of some Novgrodian had his own story. He was an Icon painter, and for three years he had been working on Icons of Saint George. In his paintings George was based on his brother who had ridden a white horse out in the spring thaw towards the frontier, looking to trade or failing that join bandits, to see the world to the edge of the border, to move! He had not been seen or heard from since, vanishing, leaving a terrible burden of memory in every gazing painting that Pavel was obligated to finish- and his daughter in the care of Pavel. Three years gone, and no word from anyone passing through, no word from the churches he made Icons for, nothing. It was easy to understand. He didn't have to explain anything, even say a word besides a ragged “It's Sunday.” And then a weary sad sigh, a solemn dusting of clothes, collection of hat and coat and his lovely gun, his dignity, and out into the cold he went.

Making his way back to the bedroll and Benoit's Ski-ready motorwagon, he wondered. Did his brother have a name? Was the brother even real, a coincidence or insight of reason transmitted without words, or was it allegory and folded myth, like George? Icons, saints, false legends, imagined stories- they should have had no weight in a clean mind. Jo pondered some more. If there was no real Saint to fail to peer through the seeming pagantry of an icon or a crucifix, what was that tug on his oil? Caught between the harsh commands of Reason and Text and the Romantic gulf of the soul, wrestling, wrestling, even as he closed his eyes and began to dream.

11: Seiðr



The caiman's eyes peered out into the dusk that was settling into the riverine woods. Around this time the fish would bite eagerly at the surface for fly food, and following them, he would bite from below at the darting silver flashes. Maybe a rabbit or something small would come along the riverbed, but they were scarce in this time. Hunger rumbled distantly in the stomach. Hunger woke it early from the summer hibernation into the heat and drought of another end-of-summer day. Tonight however, the dusk was full of the sound of large chattering things, moving with torches in the fading light of the wood. There were many of them, many more than it had seen before, and they seemed excited and less cautious than they were hunting rabbits. They brought a hog with them, straining at its ropes. The caiman had no sparking connection of recognition for a squealing hog with a rope tied round it. Such a thing was as alien to it as the many chattering animals moving deeper into the woods. Although it was hungry, and the fish were starting to flicker at the surface, easy to catch for the big reptile eyes, it continued watching the group as they went along a bend in a river and up a little forest peak. Although the thick undergrowth and the dusk half-hid them, the torch light was distractingly bright and drew its eyes towards it. A sound came, all the chatter now trained in unison, and sharp sounds, like blocks of wood slamming together in the water came over the land. The pig squealed loudly and then stopped, and the smell of blood floated through the air. Hunger almost drove it onto the bank, but fear of the torches and uncertainty kept it half-submerged in the warm river. Amidst the melody that the one-voice-of-many made, a single voice rose loud and clear, and one word, *Dié* came through, again and again, and then a single loud word *liberté*. Then a call and response pattern came. The chanting broke up and the chatter resumed, only for another chant to take over; and this seemed to go on for some time. The night was black now, and all the stars glittered, like eyes watching the strange scene beneath. If the caiman had a sense of poetry, it might have seen approval in the twinkling colors of the bejeweled night, but it after all was only a caiman, missing the easy fishing of dusk for this event in torchlight.

In the August's to come the Caiman would see many things, people cutting back at the woods, for fuel, for gallows, for trenches and forts and firewood; to cook and fight and live freely. The fish became more scarce, but that meant little. It was big enough to muscle some of the smaller caiman from their stretches of river, and the fish kept hunting the flies in the nights. The heat that came hotter without the shade of so many trees came to mind, but only for a single summer before it slid into the shade, leaving only the children who had survived from its teeming horde of eggs in its wake. For the price of saying those words, the people at the ceremony would pay, in blood, butchered for a penny or a presidency, hung and tortured and mutilated, but neither the caiman's death or their own could efface the memory of the stars, who graced that night, and who graced every night after that, shining light on the island of *liberté* and those who carried *Dié*, one, many, or none at all, burning bright in their hearts towards a future long promised.

He was in a monastery, or maybe a mission. That much he was sure. The people all wore dark hooded robes, and the candle-light and low sand-brown walls made that clear. The other thing he was aware of was that it was both incredibly hot and incredibly cold. His body was shaking and feverish, but the air was as hot as if he had been standing over a train's boiler or by the exhaust vent of a fighter jet. He seemed to be half awake fading in and out of sleep as the monks chanted in a foreign language- maybe Russian, but sometimes it sounded like portuguese or latin, and it seemed an undeniably Roman building, low and squat and dark. The heat and Latin temperament of the place made him feel he was somewhere south, but he had no memory of getting there. He tried to think, but after a little while got nowhere. Somewhere this hot in the middle of a Siberian winter? Catholics on this side of the Urals? Or was this some kind of convert's convent? Was he back in their control, had

he fallen into the hands of his countrymen as a bandit and an outlaw on the run? A wave of nausea and fear struck him, and then as he slipped over the side of the earthen bench and started puking thin yellow trails of saliva, he felt a cold disappointment. In the end he had done nothing more than vacation. He hadn't managed to atone for even a hundredth of the lives he had allowed to be taken, benefited from being taken, from every of frontier expanded forwards, and the horror of hell, so close at hand gripped him and he felt the thin acid in his throat, heaving, heaving, cold sweat on his forehead, and then...

A distant dream, where men had been tending sheep out in dry scrub, like some coastal resort in the Levanto, dressed in white and brown robes with shepherds crooks. In a distant valley their masters were chatting in multicolored tents, striped red and white, camels laden with silver chalices and blankets of the rainbow...

He was in the scrub, long jaws and sick breath of chewed meat, yellow teeth massaged by a lolling tongue. He moved his paws forward, shoulders arching as he crept towards a sleeping shepherd. He looked behind him, and a sea of wolves was there, lurking in the scrub, hunting...

His hands were stained red, and when he wiped his arm against his mouth it came away purpled with what could only be blood. He rolled over onto his side against the sand-brown wall of dirt and saw a blackened pile of vomit entrails below his berth. He tried to remember...

Someone had left a bowl of blood soup in front of him, smelling of animal fat, chunks of beet-red flesh sitting in front of him. He looked at it and felt ill. Was this a Security Service ritual to bind him to them, a blood compact of cannibal pagans, reaching ever further, *Plus Ultra*? He closed his eyes and felt a blinding pain behind the hot fever, and he doubled up, retching more red bile over the side of the bunk, half-curdled flesh-broth soaking into the loose soil of the mission. In the white flashes of pain that brought beads of sweat to his burning red skin, he saw images, pictures of maps, so many maps. On them a great gray wolf was tearing off red chunks of meat from the East, eating further and further into the frontier, devouring the land. There were millions of screaming voices, like a medieval picture of the Hot Place, thin bodies, and as they fell into the encircling jaws of the wolf, they were sapped and sucked until only skin and skeletons remained. Each chunk of meat fell off the map, towards him and then he opened his eyes and saw the chunks, now covered in silent corpses filling the bowl of soup. He felt an overwhelming thirst come over him, dry and cracked lips calling out for refreshment, and before he was aware of what he did, he was sucking at the rich bloody broth inches from his own vomit, sucking it down in full complicity. His stomach felt ripe and bursting with the stuff, and for a short while he was able to drift back into slumber, leaving the flashes of pain behind him.

He woke up again. It was impossible to tell the hour in this infernal place, where there was no sun, only the glow of the thick stubs of beeswax candles. His stomach felt empty, and his teeth felt sour and hairy. He tried to stand up, but only ended up collapsing back in pain, lancing strikes in his head, total delirious lack of balance, and he toppled over onto the ground, biting dust. After sometime blissfully resting on his stomach, his head pounding and the whole world pulsing with the beat of his heart. Each pump seemed to crush his skull a little more, and he wished it would crack. Failing that he fantasized about boring holes through the skull, and his pulsing swollen brain pushing up into the new space instead of this crushing pain he felt. He smelled the dry dirt of the floor, and everywhere the stink of vomit. The dust

around him seemed to move, eddies and swirls like an ocean current. His head pressed against the hard, cool ground, he found reprieve from the scorching air for a moment.

Abruptly a hooded figure entered, pushing aside a little semicircular door in the wall to his alcove. There was a groan, and a comment in that bizarre foreign tongue. "Globe Nemesis" he heard, and he felt arms lifting him up, rough sliding under his chest and around his back as he was lifted up. A spurt of anger coursed through him, and he tried to jerk forward back to the sweet chill of the ground, yelling as he did so. It was totally ineffectual, but he heard the robe yell something. Then he was toppling back onto the earthen berth, and above him stood an angel. Long blonde tresses in curls spilled out of the hood, covering any face in a waving sea of locks and curls. "Help me! Help me! Don't let the Security Staff take me!" He called out, a prayer for intervention from this host. In return he got a splash of cold water swinging in from somewhere left of his head. He turned towards it, and saw another spraying crest of a winter baltic wave, as cold as the coldest lover's heart, crashing into S-808's bow, swamping the forward deck. Hans Elser was swept off into the freezing water, thrashing out there. He had to go after him. He turned to Dur, "strap me in" he said, bitter weather thrashing their faces, making them too hard and pinched to display any emotion, but there was flickering concern hidden in the eyes, "strap me the fuck in!! We have to go back for him!" and then he turned and dove back-

He landed hard against the ground, a spurt of salty red blood in his mouth and a sting in his upper lip. He felt something cold and wet against his stomach, and wondered if it had burst open. In a sudden frenzy of energy he looked down and saw red and yellow bile coating the yellowing flaps of skin on his stomach, a pile of guts lying half-spilled from his inside. The memory of the meat-soup rose in him again, but with his intestines burst he couldn't risk heaving and vomiting. He couldn't let them tear. Then the monks would surely only feed him to other Security Staff men, a black mass for a national communion. He started scooping with his hands, but his guts were loose, already rotten into chunks, the whiskey rot...

"Whiskey! I need Whiskey! I will die without it!" he suddenly realized, screaming the words as they appeared in his mind. He couldn't quit Cold Turkey after a bad season, four months of hard drinking and free living, no work discipline, fucking his body again and again. The tremors would hit him at any moment. He stood up, what had been his guts collapsing to the floor, he had to get out, he had to find liquor. Going sober now- he might start hallucinating. Maybe he already had. He started moving towards the door when his legs gave out from under him, like they sank into quicksand or slipped on something... he landed hard again, feeling it in his ribs this time. By his feet, a heap of banana peels sat, spread out. He tried to stand, but his feet only caught traction on the slippery yellow again, and he collapsed before he had even started to move. Again and again he tried, a dream like fugue. Maybe he could ferment the banana peels and make schnapps out of them... no that could take too long. He needed a drink, now. Doctor's orders. "I give up! I admit it! I was moving North for the Nuclear Arsenal. I've done terrible things, killed people, sat by as women and children died! I hate the fucking German Nation. We're all destined for Hell! I'm a traitor and a Red-Lover, I'm a failure and a drunk!" Anything they wanted to know, any confession they could hear, anything at all only not... blinding white pain-light flooded in behind his eyes again, and he felt something rising in his throat before it all went black again.

Frost covered the trees like a rich fur coat on the branches. The slope and the forest remind him of Hiking around Lusen in his younger days, but there was something primeval about the feel. The thick blanket of white deadened sounds, and it seemed like giant ferns were scattered about, with fronds as long as he was tall, and giant fiddleheads dusted with blue frost-glass poked through the snow, up to his shoulders. The red-blight of the pines was gone too, and the majestic firs were covered in feathered jade under their ermine finery. At his right hand, a man who looked like the dead Old Man, the General Governor, the same round soft brows and slight, padded triangle of a jaw that his own face hinted at. His hair was arranged in a great tower of copper and salt, braided and then woven into a jutting promontory that threatened to unbalance him. A curious mix of red cow-hide and thick gray wolf fur adorned the man, and when he looked down at his arms he realized he was dressed in parallel. "It's a hard winter to have broken camps and marched through the Hercynian up to these peaks, eh?" "Well, at least there are neither Romans nor Langomann here." Jo felt himself compelled to respond. It had happened like this before and would happen like this now. "Teiwaz protects," his father responded. "It can only be good to put distance between you and Roman wine anyway" and he turned what could have been a stinging remark into a light-hearted reminder of the bad old days. But he was right- it was the old days, and it was good to put distance between him and the fire drink. A sweet aftertaste to the bitter meal of being forced North by the settled men, losing most of their head of cattle as they had fled into the forest winter. Still, it felt good to be free men, away from Roman chains and the marauding campaign of their mad Emperor who had decided to march into their woods.

They stopped for the night, deciding to light a fire near a tree well. Something felt ominous and peculiar, like a nightmare or a bad dream that came again and again as they squatted into the snow around the low blaze of the charcoal. The snow felt heavy and damp despite the biting cold of the night that crept in through the pine and furs. He shivered. His father opened his back-sack and took out dried beef and cheese to warm over the fire, sending the smell of rich warm food wafting into his empty stomach. Also in the sack was a whistle of white deer-bone, and as the meat crackled, he began to blow a long mournful sound on it. The wind answered his father's call, gusting snow-burst around their tree-enclosure and turning the forest into a screen of white dots rippling over the gray background of an early evening. Jo unslung the ceramic drum he kept around his shoulder and began to beat a harsh and short rhythm to carry the wail of the bone-flute. That feeling of something forgotten and unseen, like wolves lurking behind the horizontal walls of snow, grew with the haunting melody. Ghosts of the old life, before they had fled the *Limes Germanicus* and the Roman, had rushed forward from the end and the limit of their wood. It seemed that there were shades of ice, forms carried in the fleeing wind-borne snow, drunks wailing for wine, women calling for children, his mother- his wife. Suddenly a creaking above them sounded, and it hit him as it hit him. Uncleared snow from the branches above them caved in and down on them, warmed enough by their heat to slide and cocoon them, the forest ensnaring one more pair in the cold silk of winter.

He awoke with the beating of the skin drum still sounding and the icy blast of snow in his nose, sputtering. "The gold Siegfried! The gold!" Dur was yelling at him, trying to haul his own weight onto a little plank of wood, but weighed down with mesh. "The gold! Dive after it! We can't let the current carry it away!" Siegfried-Jo looked down and saw Ilona, covered in flashing gold floating down into murky depths of emerald. He flipped himself on his side. Damn Dur and the gold, if he could only save

Sieglinde it would be enough. Ilona's hair was drifting up like a veil, interspersed with goldenbraid, a great curtain both gilt and sable stretched itself across the depths. He crouched, ready to dive-

Great claws lifted him up by his shoulders, pulling him away, pulling him out of the water, away from splashing Dur, away from Ilona's waterlogged lungs, away from the river and the gold, and then as he lifted his head it rammed into the rough and jagged armor of some monstrous wyrm. Before his eyes the scene transformed. The drum-beat, harsh and anemic pulsed inside his battered ribcage, hard and fast, and wavering. All around him, under his chin, and in front of his head, and above him, dirt. There were things crawling there, there must have been. Little black specks and dots, too small to properly make out, but so many legs, and each scattering in its own way in and out of the hard brown rock. The ground seemed full of pores, pores which whispered secrets of the ages in strange tongues. Then from somewhere in his little earthen tomb-space, a deluge of ice water and snow came, shocking him. That's right. Of course he wasn't buried. They were combing back through the Baltic in Widukindsmonat, January, a bad month, icy and cold, and nothing to do but drink so far from the frontier, one couldn't even stimulate the mind with paranoid fantasies of some Red men ambushing the dock. Elser was still out there, alone and thrashing against the dark sea- or perhaps already sinking down to the black depth. The cabin of the S-boat, just a little steel patrol thing, was always small, but now it felt smaller than ever, like a coffin. The blasts of gray wind forming slick spikes of ice on the railing, the frost in the beards and on the brows of the deck men. Somehow, the slush had gotten into the bridge, and he felt an icepack forming against his spine as he yelled commands into the crew headsets. Out beyond their little can of steel and ice, the winter sea roared, moans and screams of the natural essence, or maybe still Elser, maybe still fighting somewhere out there, unbent before the fury of gods.

The wind ate his face, kissing it with bites of frost and leaving icicles hanging off the hair on his neck. He pulled on goggles, not the ones with dark lenses but clear glass, but as soon as he had them on, his breath started to fog them. Stepping away from the wheel he looked across the deck at the miserable, wet-to-the-bone crew. What hope was there of even recovering a body? The sailors all knew that the winter waves kept their bodies dearly. He wanted to do nothing more than go down into the hull for a smoke and a glass of pear schnapps and to hide from the cold and the killing sea. He could see the glass in his mind's eye, a nice piece of crystal, like those his step-mother had, thin and angled waist and then a buxom and swelling bell of a glass, etched roses around the cusp... another wave, white froth indistinguishable from the ice it left on the guide wires and the steel cord of the railing crashed over the bow. A hand wrapped itself over his shoulder, and then a whole arm crossed his chest... "Come below, come on," Ilona egged "it's cold up here. Dur can make it alone. He's tough. He can make it. You can take a break, you've done so much searching already" her voice was soft and quiet by his ear, her lips pursed, their peak just ever so slightly brushing his ear...

Blankets held him in their arms, soft and warm and folding around him. Down below in the barrack-house his father was bellowing away with his mother, indistinguishable but threatening, frightening, hints of change and loss. The words, more of just sounds really, sounds on the fearful inflections of anger, the sounds of Important and Frontier and Work and Away kept coming back, over and over, and then the word love, a word that sounded more hurt than anything, in two tones, over

and over fading to quiescence. Memories flooded back again, some disease scare, a new strain brought back, who knew where (except, the thought pushed itself in, he *did* know where. Was it a sign from the future, a message of God that he could only read now?) the new measles strain, before the new vaccine came. Somehow his mother had gotten it (he had never, ever, not once, broached the subject, to ask if the old man, even then, had been aware of the kind of work they were doing out there, that he had himself wound up doing out there?) and was on her sick bed. Wrapped in plastic, in a great fishbowl shape, and he couldn't get close enough to hold her hand. He sank deeper into the blankets and tried to curl up against the plastic tent. Her eyes were red and swollen shut and her skin was hot and raised. She just lay there, coughing and moaning for God, and he never really got to tell her how much he loved her. Something loud slammed shut and the blankets jumped away and he was in his kitchen looking at the Slav house-maid who had kept the place clean. Her head was inside the oven, and the rest of her body spilled limply around outside of it. The whole room smelled like rotten eggs.

Another spray of Baltic water washed over him, and he was staring off into towering waves, black as night against the slate sky and gusts of snow. He blinked cold water out of his eyes- the black leather brim of his hat did nothing against the spray and the wind. Somewhere out there in the waves something pale seemed to float between the big crests of waves. Perhaps- He kept his hands, raw and red from the cold water on the wheel, trying to keep a bearing fixed against the push of the currents, a real physical battle of will. God willed, and he won, approaching the thing, caked in ice, thick, but- just a block of ice. Some angles looked like a face, like Ilona frozen in marble, but she was still nowhere to be seen, taken by the cold waters.

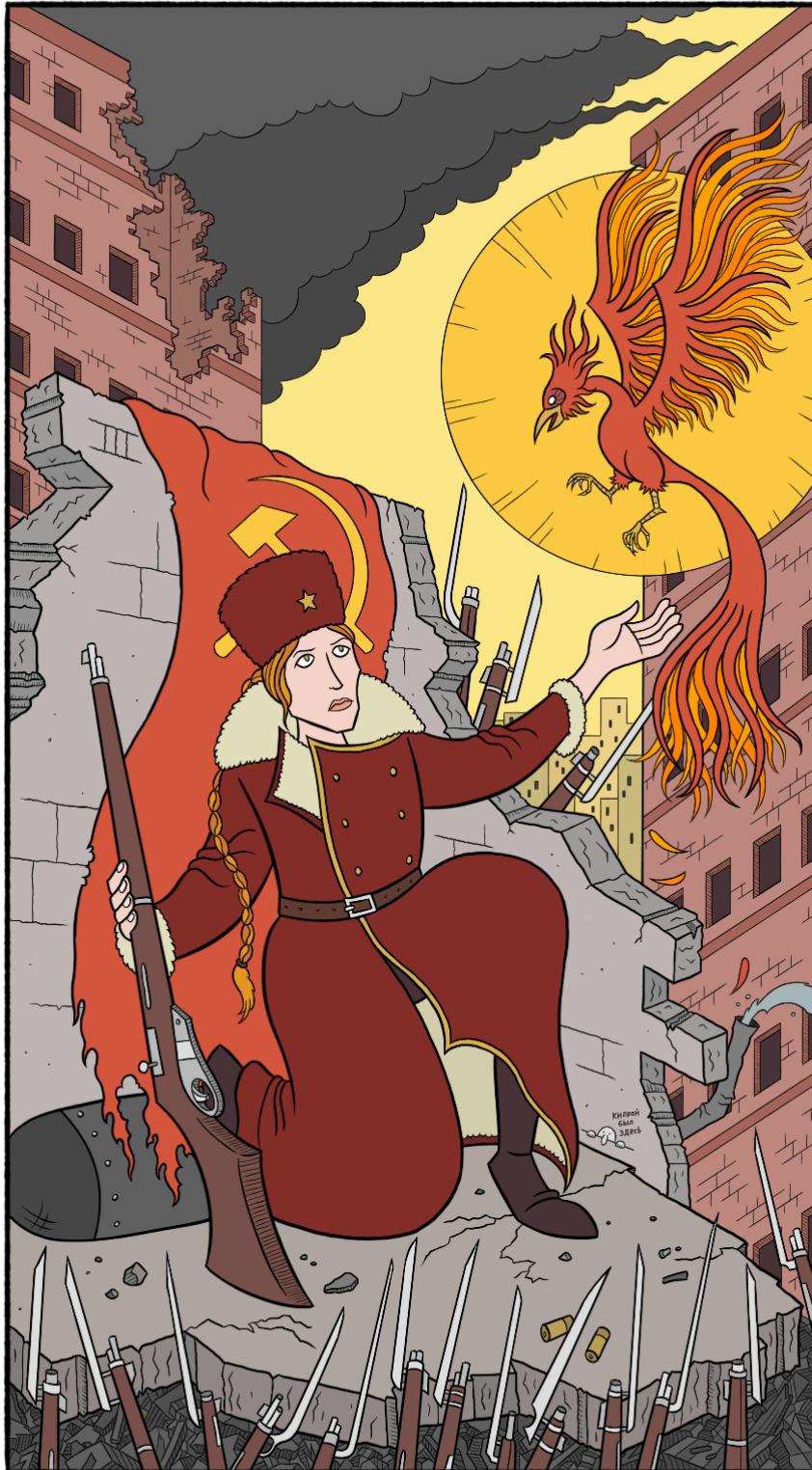
He came to in the Spanish mission. There was nothing in his memory after a particularly bouncy mountain road with Benoit and then... a haze of fever-dream and fantasy. The whole berth was wet and muddy under his hair which felt long and matted. His naked body looked emaciated but his stomach was somehow swollen against the mud coated bone of his pelvis. He rubbed his head, which stank of sweat, and noticed something yellow, smelling of bile, under his fingernails. Everything seemed quiet and still, the only motion coming from his jerky movements and the dancing black shadows on the muddy brown of the walls. His breathing felt strained and his heart felt... irregular and weedy, pulsing like an odd thistle among rows of wheat. He didn't know how long he'd been here, nor where or who had him. He paused for a second, thinking, then decided. If they knew he was aware again, they might get stricter quickly, and he wasn't sure he could pull off much acting medicated in this state. He got up, and saw a filthy, vomit-stained and sweat infused wool blanket on the ground. He wrapped it around himself and then, staggering and half-supported by the wall moved towards the wood semicircle of a door.

More than step out, he fell as the door swung out into a dim earth hallway, quiet with the sound of sleeping breaths. Fortunately the earth hall was narrow, and he landed almost upright against it. The blanket, wrapped loosely around his emaciated waist almost slipped off, but he managed to catch it, and wrap it over itself more tightly, until it clung around his bony frame. As quietly as he could manage, he crept along the narrow passage, lit only from the distant end by a dark red glow. As he moved along, it grew hotter and hotter, like he really was in Hell, not Spain. By keeping one hand pressed against each wall he had managed to keep himself upright and forward facing as he moved, but now the left wall grew too hot, and he pressed

himself against the bone-dry dirt of the opposite side as he inched towards the light. Abruptly the wall fell away, and he tumbled too, into a large dark room. The cushion of the blanket and the thickness of the earth floor muffled any sound, and he bit the inside of his mouth until salt flooded in to keep from crying out. Facing him was a massive boiler, heaps of black coal around it, grime and soot caking almost every inch, as black as night lit by sparkling stars of unvarnished chromium. At the base a mouth opened, sucking in a white hot rush of air. Inside lay a bed of coals as red as the Devil's ass, scorching his dry and drawn face. He rolled himself over and managed to find a wooden post to pull himself up against. He was almost on his knees, arms straining at the little effort when the whole wood edifice gave way and toppled, sending metal crashing and clanging around into the darkness left unilluminated by the satanic light. Voices in that strange tongue sounded, but these sounded more Red Russian than White Spanish, and he wondered how much fever was mixed into his reasoning. No matter. The movement beyond the ring of hellfire was alarming enough; adrenaline flooded his veins, and damn the tears in the muscle or on his face, he made it upright and standing, and then he rushed through the cave following the trickle of cool air. Things were moving on the edge of his eyes, and try as he might he couldn't make out a persistent hallucination from a row of bunks. Only a hide covering waited for him, which he dove through out into the blinding white spanish sand-

It wasn't sand, it was Siberian snow, and it met him in a diamond crust as hard as ceramic armor, and as sharp as a knife mid-rib. Above him, an evil beeswax-orange fingernail clipping of a moon sat, scraping the tops of the snow coated trees, and the sound of something, like a train, but many, maybe wolves, sounded out. The wind started blasting like a spell invoked, sending little knives of diamond dust against his skin, cutting it red and ripping the air from his lungs. He felt biting pain at his ears and fingers as he plunged them into the hard snow trying to rise. He almost did, and then fell, strength sapped at every moment by the cold beyond cold, sinking into him, into his bones. His fingers were raw and slow moving, and though they left trails of red across the pure white crust they no longer felt cold. They didn't feel much of anything. He could feel a biting cold at his eyes, worse than the worst red-eye on pervitin or Soma-tea, cold eating his teeth, cold in the roots and in the jaw, cold pressing against the curve of his skull from all directions. The moon seemed to grow in size, like a huge sickle flashing in his eyes. Hands grabbed him, talons of an eagle or a wyrm tearing at his flesh, hoisting him into the air closer and closer to the moon- but it was only a gold sickle against a blood-red background, and he was only being brought back under the banner into the warmth of the fur door and the furnace room, and for the first time in a long time, all the tension and fear unwound themselves from his stomach, no alcohol needed, no tremors or buzz of anxiety in his blood, no need to tap his foot or his fingers, just calm tranquility as the feeling left his bloody hands.

12: Imperia, Borne on Firebird's Wings



In his dream the knight wanted to collapse. The inside of the stiff suit was full of sweat and blood. The leather straps of the chest piece tugged down on him but would not fold into the relief of collapse and bit against the padded linen around his arms, chafing and burning the tender wet skin. His charger stallion, a big white German thing, panted desperately. It too had a thick steel plate on his head, and after lugging him around all day, pink foam was building up around his lips, poor beast. He was alone now, the heaving steps of the beast almost tossing him from his secure saddle, grips on the pommel and feet locked into stirrups. The conifers were thick around him, frosted with inches of snow thickened with moisture. By the minute the air seemed to grow warmer, and as the sweat continued to pour off his brow he finally threw up his arms, straining under their gauntlets, lifted the thick iron helm by the embossed bronze bull horns, and placed it on the pommel. He pulled on the reins, gently, promising rest to the straining animal, and swung himself back out of the stirrups and then over the saddle and onto the ground. His thighs, sore from the hours of riding, from the grip of the charges he had done, threatened to give out. He fumbled, the stiff iron falanges over his fingers blocking movement, no he needed to take those off first, and then the leather straps of the gauntlets, and finally, bare fabric, he could wipe his brow. The tears of shock and pain mixed with the salty sweat and had to be wiped away too. How could the Ordensmarchal have been so foolish, to order a charge across a lake? The horses which had not slipped and fell, or tumbled into the militia spears on the bank, or broken legs, were useless, moving slowly over the slick surface. A nightmare of cold and falling and confusion, no way to dig into hard dirt and firmly charge. God had willed it. Punishment for the sin of pride; tempted by that devil of a Novgrodian.

He became aware of running water, soft green moss below his hands, warmth like that of a subterranean spring pulsing through the snowy landscape. He turned, gazing into the warm dark waters where steamy figures danced up across the crystalline snow. In the stream dark fronds of vegetation danced, hinting at a greater depth still hidden. Then, like a flash of light, a pale shape floated up. A corpse from the lake? But no, bodies would not sink through such solid ice... the white was a delicate hand with long white fingers, and then it arced backwards and a fuller form rose up, a fair lady dressed all in white, closed eyes and a halo of floating golden hair, wrapped and covered delicately in the fronds of seaweed which wrapped themselves around her. He bent down, his sweating pasty face turning redder and redder in the steam, looking at the gold in the watery depths, and then under his sweating palm, he felt the moss slip and the heavy cuirass pull him down, tumbling into the water towards the woman.

The stream was shallow and narrow and hot and the splash of water from his fall covered him. The tumble had shattered the image in the water, which was now soaking into and weighing down all that linen padding. He stood against that growing wait, the water still warm and refreshing on his skin, dripping down, but already standing his head was above the steam, and the sweat and water were chilling into a biting frost on his skin. He started stumbling forward down the river, not even trying to pull himself up the muddy embankment of soft moss. He could have fallen in from any angle, but to get back up he had to go through the riverbed and hope it flattened out at some point. He had to keep alternating between the hot steam and the frigid air, burning around his feet and frost around his tonsured hair, frost on his bald dome and the beard, pain from the boiling heat around his ankles. Then, as he rounded a bend in the river, a house, a structure of mud and sticks jerked out across the water, forming a small hot pool where little fish swam in the cooler shallows and grass still grew green in this late bitter winter. And then, strolling across the dam, some kind of prancing animal with a devilishly wide grin, yellowed fangs, intelligent eyes and hands. It looked like it was about to start laughing at him as *it picked up a stick in it's own hands and started poking around by the fish!* This was some rare devilry indeed! And then further confirmation- a blonde woman, bare entire as if she were bathing rose from the water with a stick of her own. What kind of pagan ceremony, pact with the malevolent powers was he witnessing? He

reached for the pistol at his hip, the rippled wood grip of the trusty 9mm holding fast despite the pouring sweat and river splashes, pulling that blue steel barrel up at waist level. Then he gave a startled shout, and as the sopping blonde mane began to turn towards him, he slipped again, felt his legs buckle against the mud and slimy rocks, his head falling backwards towards the rock, and then an almighty bang.

She pulled the red wool of the shawl, soft and well-worn, closer against her face, catching the misty gusts of breath as dampness on the tight stitches. The snow was still thick on the ground, but signs of stirring life were beginning. It was only midday, but the hours of sunlight felt long. Maybe it was the spring, maybe it was the thousands of kilometers she had traveled south during the winter. Either way, it was refreshing. Her skis slid through the crust of snow- not only had there been snow too stuck around this year, but it was still on the ground here! There was no telling these days, but it seemed providence was with her. She could feel the tendons and muscles in her gut and knees strain and loosen, one gliding step after another. The footpath was easier for its persistence. People carrying pelts one way and guns another had worn glacial tracks into the landscape, creating a little railroad of ice for trade. Another sturdy push and glide. Perspiration was glistening on the part of her forehead bared by the shawl. The gusts of cool air would freeze the slick on her skin, but the protective layers of fabric were too hot for the hard skiing. Still, the snow tracks had a good slick crust, so the going was fast and she would make her destination before the sun set.

The track swayed low, staying off of ridges- they would have given a speed boost on the downslope, but the cost of visibility and early melt meant they were preferentially avoided. This worked well until little streams settled into the dips and turned the tracks to a mess of slush. Secondary tracks sprung up onto the little hillsides to account for this, and along the bottoms where the spring would bring a flood of tar like mud, some green was already poking through, the extreme front edge of the green front of spring. The thin but tough embossed hexagons of stems, and the fringe of parsley like leaves were a mystère to her, but you never knew what might be useful, so when she would stop to check bearings and swig cold water from the little birch canteen at her hip, wipe sweat from her brow, check the lacing on her skis, and gnaw a little dry jerky she also picked one in five of the little stems and lodged them into the baggy wool pockets hanging off the caped shawl. Then, before fatigue started to weigh down her muscles, she tightened the shawl and pushed off again. Clench, thrust, clench, thrust, rhythmic mechanic motion, almost automatic burned into her by years of practice, the slight slouch and low profile. Here, of course, it didn't matter, and besides that the red of the shawl shone brightly out, the white overskins tied around her waist a useless camouflage. As planned though, all the people to avoid were taking advantage of the last weeks of hard ground to get back through the pass before the rains and the mud set it.

The ponds with their long grass skirts were already breaking up and turning into a morass of half-melted ice and half-frozen water, the round orange sun glancing and rippling off the messy contours, when she saw the thin tail of gray smoke from over one of the hillocks. Rather careless and exposed compared to where the woman she was looking for usually wintered, which was a warning sign. Because of that, she approached cautiously. Taking off her skis and =putting on the waterproof thick skin coat, a compact submachine gun cradled in the crook of her arm, she crawled

serpentine over a little hillock- and there, buried in the reeds were the half-concealed pine bones of the hut, hot breath panting out of a chimney of red-brown mud like cracked lips at the end of the winter. No recognizable symbols marked the little place but it was an unmistakable style. Weeping stumps of pine peaked out of corners, butchered into smooth joints, visible wounds below the fishbones of straw and mud that closed over it. She knew what to expect inside the weird broken rectangle half-hidden by snow, undisturbed by tracks or footprints, aside from the occasional patch that looked brushed by pine needles.

Inside the bustle of women moving back and forth around a series of black iron stoves hooked together like an organ with a single pipe. Buckets of coal, half marked "day", half marked "night" - a luxury to be able to sort coal by heat and smoke color, better for camouflage and temperature regulation earned by the hard service the "Sisterhood" here provided. Naturally, their inner sanctum which moved around between the marshy lake filled region and the pine rich mountain sides depending on season and need, was seldom visited. But a steady stream of women trained here made their way up and down the trails by ski or stallion, reaping rewards for their labors from the trade forts in the North to the bandito and ranchero camps in the south, including coal, bituminous or clean. For a group that had only really coalesced in the past 40 years they already had the trappings of an institution, from sacred ritual and nepotism to an efficient bureaucratic allotment. That could be respected: and of course medics were a constant need in the bleeding front lines of the endless war. She caught the eye of her friend and liaison of sorts, "Alexandra! It's been too long! I see you are as hard at work as ever, and none the older for it either dear friend" and although in fact the two years had seen a few new lines form under the stately green eyes of the "Sister of medical science" she seemed as eternally austere as ever. "Maria! Here I was not expecting you so soon! You still fly around like a devil, you!" Her smile reached the bright green eyes, but there was the faintest hint of an edge in her voice and her brow, pale below the black hair still not streaked with gray, remained statically frozen.

Having turned over the gathered plant (some fuming rose to make people cry or something), the mystery of the cold open deepened with dinner. Roast doctor fish, taken from the lakes, little crabs, roast root vegetables, and of course pickles. Some of the women didn't take fish- some kind of fast no doubt, but always best that she didn't inquire too directly and risk threatening rudeness. The thick aroma of the cooked tench, the soft roots, and overwhelmingly local herbs filled the wattle and daub house, filling her nose with the warm moisture and scent of good food. As she was sating the sudden eruption of hunger with the good meal, Alexandra disappeared with one bowl around a bend in the building, and only reappeared after a couple of minutes. This seemed to attract only minimal attention from some of the younger cohort present, who started murmuring. Some snickered, others blushed, with their narrowed eyes more in anger than in shame. As her friend returned, she nodded her head slightly towards her, but decided not to push with questions. In general the sister's treated her with the due difference but seemed on the whole more casual than the camps she had been passing through recently. Maybe they were used to the idea of a woman like her; maybe Alexandra's respect was still that good.

As they were eating, a "Natacha" who had "been studying here with the sisters for 3 years now, and having heard so many rumors, like breezes in summer leaves, was wondering- is what they say true? Is the front opening up again?" She went on to

explain her mundanely tragic story, this-and-so family member shot, these siblings or grandparents starved, a hanging here, a raid on a village gone up in flames there, and so on leaving just her. "With a life like this, I cannot just go on and have a family with little children, knowing they might be shot or taken. I just cannot. It is why I joined the sisters, even with all their hard rules. It is here that I first heard Sister Alexandra talk about The Organization and you to-" and then suddenly cut out, eyes guiltily flashing towards Alexandra and then back to her. "Well, Sister Natacha, I can see you aren't more than twenty and already you are starting to get ideas about rumor-mongering" she commented with a lighthearted laugh. "I see the educational standards here don't hold themselves to the scornful pride of their old reputation. Are you" emphasizing with a soft gesture in the shoulder, "a revolutionary sister, or a peasant sister?" and then before any tension could gell, she laughed, layering on waves of soft tinkling and a friendly shoulder pat.

In truth, she found it more difficult every year to deal with things like this. As the legend surrounding The Red Virgin grew every year, as the myths more bizarre than the name sprouted and an aura and glamor of authority thickened, even her solo trips became like this. All that interpersonal disarming charm that had let the Organization gel in the first place now seemed weak compared to the institutionalization of her in the minds of the people she hoped to organize with. Now this poor girl looked on the verge of tears- silly Maria, silly joke, she tried to keep the chiding light. This wasn't easy for her either. "It's alright, it's alright, my darling sister. An old joke from an old time, not so funny anymore." She thought for a moment. "So many revolutionaries are 'peasants' these days, anyway, it doesn't make sense. Best to forget it?"

Some semblance of sisterlike relation preserved, the dinner dragged out, with the sister's asking occasional questions trying to suss out what the Organization was up to. Aside from the comments that those who could ride would find places out in the south plains (hardly news) waiting for them very soon, and also that the Empire on the far end of the world had started to renege on deals of modern weapons for fur and was now pressuring towns to pay tax directly or open up for big businessmen. This was a little more alarming- but it was also a little misleading. Plenty of modern weapons, enough at least for two campaign seasons, enough at least to do what had to be done to send a message if they kept reason in their heads and steel in their hearts. That part didn't need to be spread around yet. Better let the idea shimmer in the air, invisible in the minds of every individual until it came time to make it manifest. No chance of it being uncovered by torture or treason if it wasn't consciously realized until the deed had been done. As the little chatter of groups and the occasional bold question died down, Alexandra gestured to a couple of the younger women, and they got up and began work on a kettle, and as this was happening Alexandra shifted next to her. "Maria, my sister, would you come and discuss recent occurings with me over tea in my room, or on a walk perhaps?"

Outside, the moon hadn't appeared, the night sky was a deep dark blue littered with a glittering tempest of stars in orange and white and sapphire blue. Over towards the north-west, where the great pass with so many dead rail projects and burned forts lay, an nearly invisible dim orange glow emanated, like the smoldering embers of a fresh hell. It might, in some sense, have been just that, the electric lights of garrison forts and settler towns for a thousand miles burning hot smoke and ugly sodium orange into the sky, but it started to change. Like threads of a tapestry, the orange

light unfurled and spread itself out over that part of the sky, streaming ribbons that leapt and tumbled like charging knights. The martial display was so distant but felt so close and huge, magnified by the tininess of the stars above and the distance of the mountains below, leaving the ethereal performance the whole middle third of heaven to dominate. She shivered in the night chill, and then asked "What is it that you are hiding from me Alexandra?" Alexandra, too, seemed to shiver, drew her long black cloak closer in. "Maria Rusanova, I have news that might disturb you. I share it trusting fully in your reason and the confidence of our shared bond." She hesitated again, like a guilty child shuffling before the confession. "Maria, it happened like this:

About a month ago a local man who had been out gathering firewood in the cold, his family's supply having run short, found a man in an electric carriage with a moving lantern show. The man did not speak very clearly, but he made it known that he had a companion who had fallen into water and was very sick. Inside there was a man wrapped in blankets and all kinds of dirty clothes, red and sweating and shaking. This Swiss did not give a clear explanation of the man- who he was or where he came from, and the local didn't recognize him nor his clothes. Well, being a charitable man, and hoping for a reward he took him. But the stranger was sick and getting sicker, so he put him in his wagon. Apparently the stranger started calling out like a mute or a German, but his accent and his state made it equally incomprehensible to the simple man, so he brought him to us, hoping that we could save him. For three weeks now, almost since the new moon, the man has been recovering in the sweat baths. That is who I brought food to during the meal.

And then, as abruptly and nervously as the story began it came to an end. Was that all? "So Alexandra, you have rescued some stupid trapper who was wandering where he shouldn't have been? Are you concerned I would cut off his balls in front of your sisterhood to find out where good pelts are? Please, sister, I am not so cruel as that" and she once again tried to cut tension with a laugh, but now it only seemed more strained and artificial than before, and a terrible sensation passed through her. Alexandra still seemed to cower in her dress, as if she was hiding an even more terrible crime. "What? Do you want him? I'm not one of your sisterhood you know, and I say good for you to feel passion!" but Alexandra remained silent. Then, shuddering more than shivering, she inhaled a great breath of cold air to steel herself, and now Maria felt a nervous twinge in her stomach. "Maria. He is not a trapper. He has not yet fully regained himself, but he has the symbols of some great soldier. A very great soldier, with much gold braid, and in his fever he has said terrible things." And then the ground did seem to shudder too, and that twinging stomach began to twist itself like a rag wringing itself dry.

She had wanted to hit Alexandra for this, in a spasm of worry and hate, and she had wanted to drag the sonuvabitch out and cut off his balls in front of the sisterhood. Nursing a genocidaire! Nursing a living cancer! The whole building out to be burned and the sisterhood salted and forgotten! But her heart of steel knew that in passion it would become misshapen; and the organization could not afford that, so she personally could not either. Well, Alexandra had tried to say other things, but they had not ever made an impression on her, passing in one ear and being blocked out and ignored. Well, it had taken some time, but she had managed to slow that hot thud of her pulse. Well, eventually she had indeed made her way back to the building, found a spare hammock slot, and bedded down. Well! A Fucking Bigwig Nazi Fuck! She drifted

off to uneasy dreams about wolves with bloody teeth and stained dull rags hanging from yellow fangs.

The morning brought some small relief. She awoke in the darkness of the building to the low glow of an open stove, a woman bunched over pushing the blue coal for the day in over the black coal of the night. The orange glow was uniform, but something in it hinted at a great depth of a furnace. She would have to ask about that. Already though, a kettle with a thin blade of steam from its spout was going. Tea and two types of coal! She could remember how hard it had been only twenty-five years ago, when trade had almost totally collapsed, where raiding farms of illegal plants and mines of questionable stability far to the east provided the food and cash to raid and fight the encroaching rails of picket fence farms and trains and high fort walls, when the great Eastern Pacific line seemed that it might smash through the pass and the waves of chlorine had colored the sky from Vorkuta probably to Tashkent a pale haze! What a system of woodland trails and passes had been cut and won and fought for to allow this trickle of weapons and goods horizontally up and down the frontier! Tea, what a life it was with tea, and what little it would be without it. Her mother had lived that life, so young and already caring for so many children with no security or comfort, only the madness of armed bands and blood feuds and desperate struggle in the face of relentless, annihilating, civilization.

She was straining out the black leaves that filled her birch canteen with her teeth, letting the hot rich bitter dark nourishment nurse her awake from the slumber of the cave-like warren when Alexandra approached with recalcitrance and almost deference. "Maria, I want to apologize for having told you so late of the situation here, I was worried what-" "Not at all dear Alexandra, I trust that you did the right thing, and after all you did tell me. I personally should have restrained my own shock last night. If this German really is someone big, better that we hold a live chip than a dead trophy! This might really change the balance of some plans I haven't fully revealed. Is he awake? I should see him myself." This, much firmer than the laugh, seemed to ease any lingering tension between them. "Well, Maria, I am bringing him medicine- a tincture of singer's plant to soothe his throat from the hacking cough and fevered rantings. It may be that he is aware today if you'd like to investigate for yourself!"

Pine boards coated in tar like sap and waxy birchbark on both sides formed a little wall veering off like the trunk of a T from the main curve of the building, meaning that it ran parallel to any deeper furnace. This Alexandra confirmed. "After we managed to scavenge and modify boilers from several abandoned trains on the rail fragments in the pass, we decided to stop our seasonal movement. The coal and the lowness of the building keep us discrete; the lakes provide nourishment and water for steam; and the trails are near enough that we can do what business we need with the mountain towns." An ingenious reaping of the rotten grapes of civilization, she marveled. How competent and thrifty Alexandra really was. How many other roles could she have filled? Even her own maybe... but they needed these women as much as anything else, trained and coordinated and conditioned to keep the people alive and hopeful, to keep babies being born and mothers growing old. And, of course, to keep morale among the troops, such as they were, up.

The bathhouse smelled of sweat, musty human odor, that no boiling tincture or smoking incense could cure. A figure, half emaciated and shaking, draped in a stained linen and a tangled mess of a beard lay on a bench by the rocks which covered some furnace vent and emitted a terrible heat. There was a single smudged glass window

here, unlike the rest of the dark lodge, where pure white from the northern sky streamed through, illuminating the still warmth of the place. The stuff air, thick with heat and that overpowering smell of sweat, somehow both fresh and stale, was silent except for the occasional groans of the half-corpse on the bench. As they crossed the room, it must have heard them as it rolled up to sit half erect, somehow managing to disrobe its cloth. Alexandra, like a nurse, jerked forward to assist; Maria indulging in bourgeois or civilized reprobation, looked away. Did she frame it as a gesture meant to set the man at ease, or of disgust? Already Alexandra was giving the man a cup of the tincture, "Trinken, Trinken, Du musss Trinken," she babbled, and then in plain language "There is someone here who wants to speak to you" and she stepped aside for Maria.

The German's dark eyes seemed sunk into their sockets below a doming forehead half-hidden by gold-brown tufts of disheveled hair. His jowls hung from bony cheeks before disappearing in a tangled mess of a dark beard, crowned by small lips and a ruddy but otherwise bland nose. He opened his mouth, stretching it wide across a smile of yellow teeth. "Red slav?" He said in a thick accent. "Russian" she responded affirmatively. He made a weird slush sound in his mouth, and then started hacking. "What is your name, soldier?" she asked curtly. He continued to hack for a moment, wiping his spittle ridden arm on himself, pausing to breathe in before responding. "commodore Josias Wenschler, Commanding officer assigned to the Nuclear Shield, St. Michaels, Northern Reach Province." He looked her over, casually observant. "Who am I speaking to?" "Nobody" "Ah! The famous killer of the cyclops! Well, nobody, it is my pleasure!" She looked over at Alexandra and raised an eyebrow. "He is very sick still, but at least he knows his name if he is not mad." Alexandra confirmed- "the same name is on his papers, and his uniform is rich with braid and gold."

The good opening to the interview notwithstanding, it went poorly from there. The German kept pausing to retch and cough, and was foul just to look at let alone be near. Maddening tangents that seemed meaningless and insane would drop from his mouth only to be followed by fits of laughter and tearing coughs. What little she could gather was that supposedly he knew Yuri Ivanovitch and that he was trying to do something in the north. He also seemed desperately afraid of being handed over to Waffen or Orpo troops and made repeated breaks to demand assurances of this or that kind. Who did he think he was talking to? It was exasperating in the extreme. And that didn't even account for the heavy accent and broken grammar he tried to use, mixed with dumb incomprehension at even simple phrases. They had broken off after only two hours, for her lunch, and hopefully to hose down the filthy pig. She would have preferred to have him shot rather than go back to the headache of an interrogation, but the two things- the word 'Nuclear' and the fetish he had for Ivanovitch were implacable attractions and necessitated following up.

Lunch was dry bread and pickles, but with her head still spinning from the smell and the information, she took a jar of pickles and walked around the lake outside. The clear sunshine and fresh air blowing over the snow (which was just hinting at melting, and perfuming the air with that fresh ice water) cleaned her sinuses, but the pleasantness of the day didn't cut the unease that was building inside her. The Magnetic-town, that great center of resistance on the edge of the frontier, had too easily made firearms and rockets from the rich mineral mines it processed, and that had been burnt down by a single one of the Nazi weapons 80 years before. They wouldn't hit Tashkent, for as vital as the trade hub was in clandestine trade with the

red raiders it was a vital link to the overland trade. That hadn't stopped them from demonstrating ever bigger bombs just outside the fertile valley there. In Tashkent, she knew from experience, the wealthy merchants and landowners would stage big watch parties for the detonations as they poisoned the land. Whatever the Germans said about race or blood deforming, she had seen that land kill so many babies, twist and burn them even in the womb that she knew the true cause. And now this nuclear man was here, a real monster from under the bed, hidden behind the forts taking shape as this half skeleton of a man. She should beat him to death right then and there. Was that not what justice and law required for a murderer and torturer beyond degree? Wouldn't a swift beheading be more than merciful to such a human traitor? Pacing in circles as these freight-cars of thought thundered past, something else clacked past- what did Yuri Ivanovitch have to do with any of this?

When she returned, Alexandra who had noticed her discomfort at the smell, handed her two cups of the medicine. "It's for the throat, dear Maria, but it may also disguise the smell that so troubles you if you drink it" and then ushered her into the bath. The scent was as rank as before, so she quickly pulled the cup to her lips, where the dark liquid smelled of mustard and bitter cabbage and it numbed and burned alternatively as it slid down her throat. It did help with the smell though, so she pushed ahead and delivered one of the cups to the German. He seemed even more agitated than before, becoming frenzied and ecstatic as the line of questioning turned to Yuri Ivanovitch, who seemed like some kind of ancient hero to him. Why would a German, let alone a bigwig officer, ever condescend to like him? Was he an agent of the regime, one which the German intended to protect by singing praises of his revolutionary virtues? Suddenly, another fit of paranoia seemed to sweep over the man, and he first seemed to grab for her and then settled to grab himself, sobbing uncontrollably. "Ach, ach so..." and then a long stream of incomprehensible German in some fast East Coast accent, maybe Riga or maybe Tallinn as they were still called out here. The words "Waffen" and "Orpo" were the most salient for her and the most frequent for him, but little else that made sense was there, so she left the monster to its wails.

"He was much worse earlier, you know. Hallucinating, vomit everywhere, fits of long extended fever, it did not seem like he would survive. But he has been getting better. At this pace, I would think he might be mostly coherent inside of a week. You never know if he'll ever fully recover, but he might be useful alive even in a state like that." Maria sighed. "Hanging a corpse rarely looks like justice, but he still looks like a corpse." She rubbed her temples. "What could he really have that would change the balance of power here?"

The afternoon that followed was mostly personnel work- which women were ready to be assigned, who knew what region best, who was better in woods, who had horse experience, what to do in battle and in the camp, how to keep the men in line if they got "rowdy" towards them, how to negotiate with which commander (a nightmare given the turnover of bandit leaders) a mountain of ad hoc assignment and memorization, too much work for her brain alone, but it was the task at hand. By the time it had finished, and everyone from Alena to Julia had been given their tasks and been flattered and inquired about, the moon had risen, growing thinner from the brilliant peak it had had at the end of the bitter cold season. It was like a small bullet hole in the sky, crumpled and collapsing, spilling out heavenly light into the dark sky.

After a short stroll to release the stress and unwind her mind, she returned to her hammock and settled in for the night.

Her sleep was fitful again, with bizarre and vivid dreams. Tonight smoke from the furnaces condensed against the mirrored sunlight beaming from the moon, creating strange alien forms which bent low and whispered strange sounds into the bathhouse before standing tall and bounding away. This was more peaceful than the gnashing jaws of wolves the night before, but when she woke in the darkness of the lodge she felt more disturbed and uneasy. There was something she had forgotten to mention to Alexandra- "Buri is coming today with the iron dog. I will be traveling with him and taking command from there." she mentioned as casually as she could over the little steaming cups of tea and sugar. "Oh." The only response, veiled and distant already. A shame to part on terms like this. If she could have stayed and made things better again she would have- but. "I should take the German with me if he is able too. Even in his state he can ride the beast I think." Alexandra nodded stiffly. "Come, Alexandra dearest, let us not part on such terms like this today! It is a great thing we set out to do!" However even these patriotic overtures sparked little response. "Well, let's see if the little bastard is sane yet." Perhaps needling the vulnerable patient would provoke a response.

Evidently it didn't. However, despite that growing tension, there was good news on another front. The German seemed subdued today. He sat on the bench upright and calm, and nodded as they came in, almost like a man instead of an animal. That provoked a hot burst of rage, but she quelled it with a stiff smile and nod at him. She was better playing the protector to someone like Buri's interrogator in a situation like this. One had to be flexible- it was what was necessary. "Necessary" that word again, was this trail leading to blood and destruction necessary? But the years of her life and her knowledge of the recent past and conviction in breaking the barbarity of the frontier had conditioned hardness here. It was. They spent the morning in a broken mix of Russian and German trying to figure out details. A falling wind had brought him there- more probably a plane- with Yuri Ivanovitch, which explained why he had been leading red scalping raids out towards Kazan over the winter. He was supposed to be running the nuclear arsenal in Arkhangelsk (which he rudely insisted was "St. Michaelsberg" but was instead running from some Allgemeine investigation (which explained the paranoia) and insisted that there was some kind of ruckus internally between different limbs of the labyrinthine bureaucracy stretching out from that old heart of darkness itself. This confirmed all the sources behind the lines. A real breakthrough! More than that though, the man seemed hard pressed to part with. He mentioned a briefcase, which Alexandra hastily ran to grab, and asked for his uniform which he insisted on to the point of offense. It was a bitter concession, but it was well worth it, she thought.

While he was dressing, she and Alexandra broke bread together. The tension of the coming departure had been shattered by the breakthrough here. "We have real information here! We have a real *kapo* type! Imagine if he still has the codes! We could force a general withdrawal!" Alexandra eagerly asked "Does this mean the current timetable will have to be kept? We could delay, infiltrate this summer up in the far reaches of the north, take that town, negotiate a peace! Threaten to smoke them out! No need to take such a risk as you have planned? You could stay here as we work through it!" "No." The only possible answer. The signs were clear- written on every charred trunk across the Siberian forest, in every early leaf, in the tanks of chlorine

and coal boilers that carried them stretching across half a continent. There could be no half measures, not now, not anymore. It was the last hour to gamble, in her view. An awful burden; worse than the burden to build all those tanks 80 years back; worse than the burden of a wooden cross. A greater hell was rising. They would fight in the south and plot in the north- they could do both at once and they would. It was the last chance they had, the last chance she had, and they would win. Still, the elation drained from the conversation with that firm, maternal “No”, too stern and too hard for a friend. Necessary, nonetheless.

That evening, her supplies packed, the German briefed as minimally as possible, a low growl sounded from across the little adjoining lake, turning into the dark marine blue as the sun sank below the west edges of the mountains. The sky was shining in hues from purple to lemon, the silvery clouds brushed with copper and gold and sapphire hanging above the purple spine of peaks capped with the snow which was drenched in the iridescent lavenders and tangerines of the sky. From the darkening east, the growl grew louder. The iron dog, fitted with a broad plow across the whole muzzle of the beast, pushed the soft snow to the side, it's wide wheels making what remained underneath compact and solid. Behind it trundled a train of wagons and horses loaded with men and oil cans and guns. Buri! A red steel socket at the top sprang open, and a man with an impeccably smooth chin and ludicrously long silky mustache tips jumped out. In his arms, he carried a goat- “An offering to our gracious hosts!” he announced.

For obvious reasons of space and order, the band camped outside, in their wagon shelters while the sisters built a large fire outside the lodge and started cooking the goat. The skin was taken for its own practical uses, and what wasn't eaten would be processed one way or another. Livestock were too precious to waste here. She took Buri aside and briefed him. He seemed as unperturbable as ever, even at the thought of their new human cargo. Of course, she knew his story- as bad as hers, almost. No guarantee that he wouldn't try and stick a knife in his ribs that very night. So she appealed to his reason, explaining first her plan and then what she would do if it went sideways because of some misplaced rage. Buri took it all in, tranquil as an ocean. “Your wish is my command” he said, like some apparatchik putting the names of his family on a suspect list. She could smell the tics he was repressing, the anger and the fear and the pain of subordination to something he didn't fully comprehend. Still, loyalty was ingrained and understood and she commanded that across the whole frontier. Her will would be done. Confident of that, she ran through a last set of coordinations with Alexandra and the lodge sisters, saw that the goods were stored in the back of the iron dog, allowed herself a tear or two as she bid one last goodbye to Alexandra, and then stashed herself in the cabin of the car. They moved at night to minimize detection against the white backdrop of the snow in these bare areas, so by the time she would wake, they would have left this place far in the distance. There would be no dreams tonight.

13: The Way of the Conscript Pilgrim



It was sundown marking the end of the fifth day of Cheshvan, and Yoshel was tired. He was tired of it all. He had spent the day digging "air raid trenches", long jagged graves that zigged and zagged. With a shovel in his hand and sweat in his eye he could almost believe the lie, but-

Gunfire had echoed behind them all day. They knew. It was mad, and he felt that the whole earth had fallen away, out from under him, but they knew. Somehow, someway, the Germans had gone completely mad. It hadn't been enough to enslave them, have them work themselves almost to death. They were so mad, so insane that taking their lives wasn't enough, that they needed his death too.

Moishe sat in the barracks, staring blankly at the table. "No vodka. No wine. Not even unkosher drink. Why can't they do that for us?" Abram sat, picking out Hebrew letters to the splintering wood of the table. "They give it all to the gunners, the Germans and their Hiwi dogs drink it all as they shoot us. That's what I've heard." Moishe looked up. "Don't try to humanize them. They hate us so much they don't need to be drunk." "Maybe the drink because they think they can smell us." Abram suggested. They fell silent. Yoshel wondered why no one did anything.

"Shouldn't we do something?" Abram asked. Yoshel nodded. "Do what? They're out there, all around the camp, with guns and dogs. We can barely even dig our own graves." Moishe spat on the barrack floor. The silence returned. Maybe in other bunkers people were planning, maybe they were talking about loves lost or theological points, still trying to live life. Here everyone seemed dead already. A feeling of hysteria rose in Yoshel's empty stomach. He wanted to scream, to tear his hair, to fight and run. Instead he sat in his cold bed, staring at the empty bunk above him where some Jew from Gdansk had been only the night before.

The barrack slowly flooded with the gray light of another dawn, occupied by the gray men, carrying gray guns. Orpo, Abram who had lived in Germany before, said. "Orpo", almost close enough to "Orfu" back of the neck, how they got you to laugh, but.

Roll sounded, hatefully early, painfully early, like always. Those who were there in person filed out. Maybe the spirits of the others lingered in bed, if not free of the barbed wire, at least free from the early hour. They were shivering in their thin cotton; and then they were shivering in their skins, sectioned off. There wasn't much time left. Something in his gut was nagging, pulling. "Fight" "Live again" but he felt paralyzed, naked and still humiliated at that, under the gaze of the beefy men in gray who stared out.

He had always been moderate, always temperate, never a drunkard or a fighter, never a coward either, always looking for the middle road. Were there any roads now besides the one that they marched groups of men towards, down the path where gunfire sounded out in the distance? What roads were there into the bush, where dogs and men hunted with clubs.

His gut kept nagging as the day passed, sitting naked in the dirt with the rest of the barrack, in silence. Their turn arrived. He could at least move with dignity. This almost calmed the urge inside him, that at least he could die as a dignified man, reclaim something there, if he couldn't run. That acid-electric impulse kept trying to rise in his throat.

The stink of blood and shit rose as they walked through the woods to the "air raid ditches" they had dug, supposedly to protect themselves. He wondered if he could leap for a gun, but they were kept close at hand, and then men were big and had been well fed for years.

Suddenly calls rang out and they stopped. Half the Germans peeled away, and they seemed to discuss something. In the distance a column of smoke rose, and the steady drum of gunshots in the distance stilled and then intensified and seemed to almost double. Was someone doing something?

This was what the Germans would call "harvest fest". It is hard to find dignity in death in an undignified mass grave, but if one can suppose it could be found, it should not be made into photographs or postcards.

Vanya slung up his ash tool alongside his father's little hut, poured out a dribble of white liquor into a little tin cup, and went to stand outside in pale sunlight that was busy drying out green sprouts of grass. Already they were poking through as weeds might from rich red-brown earth in his personal plot, spurts of life that he would have to fight tooth and nail for space for his turnips. Ripping out one thistle was never a problem, but they came back every year, tens of thousands of them. He would shake his hands and blame Westerners, hunns, cossacks, evil eyes of faithless women, whoever. It had started in jest, but he found every bitter shake of a fist had sown more thistle-seeds, and every thistle he pulled, he hated Europeans a little more. "Perhaps," he mused, "there really is an inborn hatred in us asiatics," if there hadn't been before indignity brought him by those thistles, and of those demands they made on him, it had built up day after day of his young life. They piled up, torn roots and spiny leaves, in a corner of his garden plot, like graves of his grandparents, of his father, who each had fled back and forth their entire lives, from landlords, and then grain requisition, and then fires and famines and floods, til finally they wound up where his great-grandfather had been born, this little plot at a mountain bottom. He downed liquor, and then pulled a wad of tobacco from his pouch and stuck it in his lip, enjoying what little pleasures and sins that he could pull from red clay dirt before it pulled him back into its graven bosom.

As he was dusting off sagging porch planks and counting chores which were yet required by his village as sowing season began, he heard hoof-drums and a rushing thrum of something that could almost be a machine motor. He ran down from his porch- still young and credulous enough that if there was a motor he could believe it and know that he needed to see it. He kept a steady pace along dirt paths, not yet so dry as to be dusty, but dry enough to run on, heading towards one little agricultural center. Greening birches, tapped for spring's sap season and still bearing buckets, first starting to stand free from snow-weight standing between him and his community's heart when he caught sight- large groups of men and horses, a veritable herd, browns and blacks and bays. At their center, hairy and carrying rifles, sat machines. They were tall, moving towers, taller than a man on a horse, and rust-red all over. Thick iron plates slanted along them, entire, parting here for a funnel of thick black smoke, there for a porthole with thick gun barrels, erupting in spines, then spacing out. Backs of those monsters were wide basins, roofless and unprotected but someone had erected hide covers- like a litter of some ancient king- over several fat stumps of iron and fat guns. Under one such hide a man smoked a cigar, while another, in fancy dress, like for an ancient king, lay huddled in blankets. Behind that, wagons linked in chains to horses carried thick black barrels, food for machine-monsters.

"Vanya! Vanya!" Father Konstans called, "take some of these men to your hut and let them bring some beer out here! Our guests need refreshment!" Behind Konstans' long thick beard Vanya couldn't distinguish joy from panic, repressed ecstasy from hidden reluctance. He nodded at a couple close riders, one grizzled, scarred, face smoothly plucked except for an immaculate mustache on a red horse. Another was stout and round and had great waves of beard which Vanya imagined must be ripe and crawling with lice- kept invisible only by black and white

hair-speckles. Both men had two other horses with them, and Beard gestured that Vanya should take one. Six horses and three men returned with mountains of fresh birch beer foaming in old casks shortly. Once they had returned, old Ivarr, Karim's wife, children of late great Uncle Boris all had set out tables full of boiled potatoes, pickled beets, even some last loaves of winter bread that hadn't been set aside for lent's end. Vanya suddenly felt grateful that it was still fast-time, otherwise they might have been obligated to butcher lambs and break out their salted stocks. Cavaliers and drivers both did not seem to mind, taking out strips of smoked meats, chunky warm milk (from where, he did not ask) which smelled like lemon and soda, and offered it to gathering villagers as they broke loaves.

Sun was ripe through green buds and low in spring twilight as Balakinova girls brought out steaming pots of borscht that had been heated inside their Church's old big kitchen, one which stood opposite on their central square. Of course old Balakin couldn't let a Borisovich get away with just bread- that was their business though, and Vanya started thinking hard about how unfair it was that he was dragged into farce's middle and forced to give up all his fresh birch beer. He couldn't see Valentina Balakinova looking, (or really, not looking) at him if he stared at strangers, men who were now well into draining second casks of frothy clear birch-beer. Although it was easier than thinking about, well anything else, he did notice that a third of them who were all sitting on one bench had stayed away from beer, and were now standing up with their saddle blankets, heading south on foot. Father Konstans seemed irked at this and began to speak heatedly with a rider, a man with long white hair. White-mane had his hair done in great braids, and although his face had deep skin canyons etched in- halfway between choleric winter white and burnt brown summer leather- he seemed to energetically disagree with Konstans. Ioseb Borisovich seemed interested in their argument and brought both men tankards of Vanya's rapidly dwindling beer. Plucked mustache returned to a table, and seeing empty casks looked at Vanya. "More?" he asked. Although it chafed Vanya, it would help him continue to not notice Valentina as she drifted closer to one rider- or maybe if she didn't. "Yes, yes my friend, of course there is more, come with me" he said.

Vanya had been unable to eat, although fresh bread and borscht had made him salivate. He had only had a single mug of his own fermented sap, but with no food and one wad of tobacco that he was working on, his head was still starting to spin, and dusk had only begun on such a rare lenten feast. He turned to Plucked-Mustache, whose long appendage draped down his face, below his jaw like a forked beard. But his fixed jaw and eyes reminded him of a wolf, more than a goat. A slightly blurry but friendly nod and a couple questions got talking with Plucked-Mustache, who said he went by "Marat" and had been with "Vildan's group" for a decade, ever since rinderpest had taken out his people's herds. Beer made him dizzy but it also gave him courage to ask if Marat and Vildan's other sober men who were muslims, or just didn't like his brew? "But of course not!" he began to laugh, "We are no peasants to hide behind illusion and faith, when even those paltry goods have abandoned our fathers!" and Vanya felt a surge of annoyance. He wasn't a monk, or even a good Church goer, but Konstantin was a center of community, and his presence had kept them all together, gave them a place to shelter, and for late Boris and still-stumbling Balakin to negotiate truces and agreements. Yes, they had to tithe swine to Ekatrinyograd's Metropolitan, but without that they would not have a market to get glass and iron and what medicines they could. And how had "Reason" and "Science" that his pitiful father had worked out for him? When his old man's last hidden cache of penicillin, tucked in a

rodent's nest had been tapped, hadn't his mother died like so many others... but better not to fight, and instead speak thusly: What was this great "group of Vildan" doing wandering around drinking peasant beer, and why was mustached Marat abstaining if he wasn't a hidden Muslim?

They kept talking as they pulled another rack of birch sap beer casks and strung it up on Marat's spare horses. "When rinderpest came, my family starved. My father was very religious, he said that he had been freed from perdition's chains by this frontier's great expanse, that skies so blue had been put into cages and bars before now- that he remembered his grandfather dying, butchering his cattle as men from Russian cities came to put them in pens and take away his tents. What kind of man would butcher his cattle when someone came to build him a house? In those days, our people were backward... even my father, who learned new alphabets, who went to school, never got over his father's superstition. But I have, now." and Vanya wondered if some of his great-grandfathers had been those men from cities- and now look at their progeny! "What a marvel," Vanya wondered. Marat continued: "And then rinderpest came, waves and waves out from some new source, worse than any before. Settlers brought cattle into our old pastures, rode in with guns to kill any of ours, stop our diseases from spreading to their herds, they said. Huh, well, it was clear to me that those bastards were bringing plague, but my father Ibram, would not listen- 'It is God!' he said, and he fasted to atone." Marat's voice lowered, his plucked mustache quavering, and he became bitter even as they mounted their horses and started back towards company. "My sisters stayed with him. I did not. Allah would not help us. Maybe someone else might have, maybe someone like Valdin's Mountain Fire-Lady." They had lit lanterns amidst tables still food-laden, lanterns which cast strange yellow shadows into green woods, still so gray with buds, and even pines only just starting to freshen. "I found Vildan's group already- he was much younger then, and full of hot white anger, like a flame. And- well, there're too many stories. But when I had come back to those youthful pasturelands, there were only bones- all our animals from young lambs to old bulls. And my father? Rotting out in open plains, not even picked at by birds and wolves. I often wonder if ranchmen didn't find rifles too personal, and brought plague to him too." He sat in silence for a breath, undulating with his red horse's motion. "Not even deer were left, I heard, and even thin wolves must have been hungry." He finished with a slow tone that sounded like sorrow and shame. "Not hungry enough to eat my father."

A fire was roaring in evening's chill that haunted yet village air, a ghost of earlier months, and each table had been moved around one big communal fire pit once they had returned. Marat gestured at one metal machine's rear, saying "bring soup for that man in there, and some bread, but no beer- he's been very ill and needs to recover" then started for a moment "Go on boy, he isn't contagious, it was from- well, a winter water's chill. No plagues for you." but gut recalcitrance remained on Vanya's face, curving down from his young brown brows, dripping skepticism from corners of his mouth. "I'll let you take some shots with my rifle tomorrow morning for your trouble, eh?" An offer which worked. Trying not to grin at this bargain, Vanya ran to grab a bowl and dumped some still warm borscht in it, strips of beet and cabbage floating in dark red broth. He was moving so fast as he cut bread that he had no time to notice that Valentina Balakinova was talking to another bearded rider, plucking at taught strings of a triangular instrument he had erect in his lap. If he had caught a glimpse, well, he was able to turn his attention back towards that adorned machine-sheltered sick man. He was wrapped in linens and furs, glistening with

sweat, but seemed lucid. At his side a peaked white hat and a brassy deep blue tunic sat. He noticed rich colors and a steel-gray wolf's head glaring from peaks of white linen and black leather, and wondered for a second if it was some Turkish lord's suit. But then an awful great silver eagle, tarnished as it was, on belt buckles and epaulets caught his eye and punched his gut. What was a soldier doing in their town! If word got out, if this dying soldier liked their woods, or their plots, or their pigs... he looked around. No one was watching. It would be so easy to smother a sick man, to keep Valentina safe... and then sick red eyes looked up at him, locking gazes. Sick's beard was dull in night with only a waxing silver crescent, hanging low, and flickering pit-fire flames to illuminate it. Still, it was short and looked green- maybe this man was a deserter and a bandit even with all his brassy braid. Sharp and polished words that tumbled out of Sick-man's mouth were meaningless nothings, ramblings of a sick mute to Vanya, and his face must have shown that. He simply placed soup-bowl and cut bread alongside Sick's furs and gestured at it and then Sick's mouth. He nodded and began to eat, gingerly moving his arms under fur blankets.

Just as Vanya was turning finally to see Valentina close to that coyote of a man, close enough to make his stomach churn and drop, he heard: "Thank you for soup son. What do they call you?" and Vanya turned away again, saved from a nervous agitation his brain lied, he had seen nothing. "Vanya, sir" "Well, Vanya, I can see by your face you're being eaten alive by curiosity" which whether or not it was true- or had anything to do with Sick-man's thoughts- was a lifeline enough for him. "Are you a soldier out of your Great Father's capital? What are you doing here? How did you find our village? Why hasn't Marat or Sir Vildan killed you? Did you desert? How do you speak my tongue?" so many questions pouring out, easing his stomach's nervous, shameful churning. "Ah, ah, ah, slower son. I'm no-one. I know *der* Government and *der* Leader there, and I know *der* men they send out. I know many things that are useful, and more which aren't and that is useful enough to Vildan that he lets me ride in his pride of lions... I woke up three weeks ago, bone-sick and feverish, thin as a skeleton, and since then I've been resting and fattening up so I can be of some use. How I got to be a skeleton is a story for me and God alone, but he has seen fit to place me here." This last statement, choking flowers and all, still piqued Vanya's attention- "But Vildan's group laughs at God, why do they feed you when you talk of him? They even argue with Father Konstantin!" this lit mirth behind Sick's eyes "my God is inescapable for me, and where Vildan carts me God follows. No matter though- even in this group His shadow haunts me I think, although I know enough to keep such shadows away from Reason's Light" and he tapped his nose, a strange gesture. Then he sank back into fur robes, finished with supping. "Will you not come and see our village, sir?" Vanya asked, eager for distraction. Too late as his stranger was already sinking back into sleep, head submerging in brown fur.

Vanya wanted to sleep too. He had had a long day, full of too much new information, and a long day ahead of sowing mustard seeds into bare earth. A coyote of a man with his instrument was howling with laughter at some joke that had just spread across one table. He spat out his spent wad, kept his head bowed as he walked alone to his father's empty and desolate hut, and started praying Jesus's prayer. Which would his father have detested more he wondered? If his words "Lord Jesus Christ, Have Mercy On Me a Sinner" drowned his thoughts, surely he would keep himself from crying out? "Oh Vanya," he really could not bear to think about a bearded coyote in furs, or large hands over Valentina's shoulders, and so instead he turned his head skywards. Moon's crescent was just starting to graze tree tops on its descent, but

higher up still was that old red star. He thought of a story from his childhood, his father trying to make him read ancient yellow pages that smelled so badly. There had been something about that star- no, "planet" in those stories hadn't there? So many stories about better worlds, dreams of electricity and plenty and love, strange magics with blood and long-gone Kings. But his door was here, and jars of distilled mash were there along creaking walls, and then his tin cup was at his lips, liquor burning them with its kiss.

He woke up curled up against a tree, his head lolling sideways against a knot covered in moss. There was an ugly pink pool of sick at his side, and judging from dry crust around his mouth, he had gotten some on him. He was a little tired and a little hungry and a little cold. He stood up and stretched out, and nearly fell over on an ankle that was much weaker than it had any right being. How had he gotten here? Must have run outside to vomit and then fallen asleep, that was probably it. Good thing he had- well, he was in his coat anyway, so it was all right. And there weren't too many wolves around these days, so that was fine too. "All's well that ends well" Vanya thought, and then was sick again. He made his way back to his cabin, treated himself to a warm stove, a little tin of hot water and tea after such a night, and tried to stretch out soreness from his back. As water heated to steam he splashed some over his face and rubbed and spat and cleaned all grime off. Bitter tea and a boiled egg and stove-warmth of burning wood against his back restored his young muscles quickly. Gray morning mist had not entirely burned away before he was out with his ash dibber. When it came time to move his little corn seedlings to their holes he would use a wide wedge, but today he was just scraping narrow ditches in rich parts of his garden and tossing mustard seeds in. Below Earth's root hair and crusty dried dirt, black soil was yet fertilized with fresh waste that even swine wouldn't eat. Maybe they would have extra grain this autumn, with such horse dung that these riders would leave- a rich harvest he thought trying to be chipper about such men who had drunk all his beer and- well, whatever. He had work to do. He thought of swings of his dibber into dirt, not of anyone, certainly not of *her*. He was almost done as sun crossed sky's meridian and a coyote that had passed him up last night came meandering for him.

Coyote, bearded, wore a horse hair vest, sewn shut with bone buttons, a tall cone of sheepskin and felt fluffing above a round and jolly face, drooping blonde beard over ruddy unshaved skin, loose green fabric underneath. He was shorter than Vanya, which was encouraging, but much stouter, like a boulder, and he had a long knife and a rifle tied to his horse's saddle. "Vanya, Vanya, still alive and hard at work after such a night? What a good boy! Your parents are lucky, no?" firing so loaded a remark that Vanya felt even more off-kilter. Where had this horseman learned his name, but not learned of his parents? Surely from no villagers... "Haha, a little joke between us Vanya," Blonde Coyote was walking closer step by step, tugging on long drooping ends of his mustache, "But Vanya, this is not such a bad farm, not such a bad life! I almost would settle here if you'd sell it. But what could a man like me give you for a quiet life like this?" Coyote grinned. Vanya felt that he had to do something to get back on his feet "Who are you friend? I don't think I know your face?" This set Blonde-Coyote to tears, long yapping howls of laughter, and then it clicked, dim memories in brown liquor-light of walking down lantern-lit paths to win Valentina from this laughing jackal at her side, his aching ankle, what were these, from a dream or nightmare half remembered? "Are you one of Vildan's men who drank so deep from my beer?" Wiping tears from his eyes, "Well little Vanya, we are all our own men in our own ways. But I would think you would remember twisting your ankle trying to kick me off your

precious Valentina?" "Off" that word stuck a little too long in his mind, it should have provoked some strong association, some searing memory, but... "Off" "Off..." "...off" "I'm sorry I have no idea what you mean, sir?" Maybe he could stonewall him and this malicious story, block them out for good, let this cossack host pass on from sight and memory and feel...

Striding with long boots laced into leather leggings, Coyote mounted his porch and peered inside. "I can't quite tell where you are in your day, lad, but our sun is high, and my thirst is strong. You got any of that sweet beer left to wet my mouth?" and then he saw a bottle of white drink. "Well! What have we here! Using copper pots! Eh my lad! Quite industrious! I ought to sample this" and he grabbed a bottle-stopper with yellow fangs, spat, and started suckling like piglet to teat. "Not bad! What's your mash? Surely not boiled just of sweet beer?" Vanya had to respond to a compliment, so he corrected Coyote- "Swedes. Beer-sugar clogs copper." "Well! A young engineer! Good work little Vanya! Well, come have a glass with me" and he gestured towards Vanya's father's tin mug. Vanya, unsure, nodded under pressure, and leaned his dibber against his porch, sipping from his own offered mug, of his own drink. "Well little Vanya, back at your village square I think there's a rifle looking for someone to shoot it? Yes, you made a deal last night? To make sure there's no hard feelings between us-" For what? Vanya wondered in silence if this wasn't some devious ruse, "-I came to find you. And while you shoot, I can stick around here, make these chicken scratches into hard dirt, guard your fine drinks. Go on! Up road! Go!" He gestured with a crude hand: "I'll even let you take my horse for insurance"

Entrusted with a handsome collateral, including Coyote's saddle, Vanya clattered on up-road to his appointment with Marat from last night. As he was rounding a bend, his heart burst into swarming butterflies. None other than Valentina Balakinova was walking down towards his cabin! "Ho there, Valentina! Are you not busy making fresh soup?" but he was met only with dark glower. "Well, Valentina! Look, I'm very happy to offer you a meal at my cabin! But, but, I've uh look I'm appointed- I've got an appointment- I'm, well, Marat, uh" This time her look was mixed with saccharine pity, like an angel at a damned man. Although one could never discount it having been a look of sympathy and disgust provoked by a stupid boy, he thought of an angel not a woman. Either sent a tremor through his heart. "Vanya Leonidovich, I would never be allowed to visit your cabin. I have appointments of my own down this road" and then seeming to grasp his gallant intention "and I am not in need of an escort on some stray pony from some apparatchik's son." Chewing tobacco to drown her word's bitter taste, he silently turned forward.

So Vanya from a little woods cabin, armed with a rifle he had never touched before and only Jesus's Prayer to quell heart-tremors of haunting half-memories, rode into town. Marat, feeling his chin and looking at a shard of broken glass was leaning against Sick's rusting war-machine. He glanced up as Vanya managed to stop Coyote's horse. His father had had to sell his only horse, trading his sleigh which he had once used to make his home stops in Winter for a pair of birch snowshoes, but riding a horse, once learned, couldn't be easily forgotten, Vanya found. He swung himself down and approached. "Look who did come. I wasn't half curious if you'd stick to that whiskey-courage of last night no? Brave. Silly, but brave. Well, our day's been a-wasting and we have miles to go before we sleep. Ready to ride up?" Vanya was extremely puzzled. "Marat, sir, I'm here to shoot a rifle?" "Yes, yes son. Up and to them. Come on, I can see a bedroll and boots and a coat on that saddle. You're set by

my measure.” Vanya was lost. “Do we have to ride far out of town to shoot?” Which earned him a similarly confused look from Marat. “Were you imaging a shootout here? As if we’d get involved in some petty town arguments? No money in that kind of thing. Swine-towns with no rail never have much gold. Not even in their churches” he winked. “Aren’t we just shooting targets?” “Well son, that’s how I see it these days” a cryptic answer that made nothing clearer. “When will we return?” “Well, Vanya, as you put it, ‘when we’re done’. What a rousing speech that was, or well, at least it had its moments between bursts” this time with a kindly expression. Vanya, unable to remember saying anything at all, shrugged, figured he could let that man-jackal tend his house for a few days. If he drank all that liquor- well, good for Vanya’s health his father would have said. Maybe he’d drown in it like his old man had. Maybe Vanya could even get a shot in at him when they got back, a good fist-swing. And Valentina would still be here- maybe even she would be impressed by a bold ride out with this strange band.

Gray morning light woke Vanya for a second day in a row. He must have gotten a lot more sleep this past night, but he felt even more tired. His thighs were sore. They had ridden along Westpath, past a bigger town at crossroads, cutting away from its three churches and many houses, not stopping for anything, through one afternoon, pulled over near a clearing and moved their iron beasts into tree cover. He had helped Valdin’s men cover it with tree limbs and grass. Then they set up a firepit in a clearing by some large river, more than five times as wide as he was tall, butchered a lamb one of them had grabbed from somewhere, and began to roast it with potatoes from one barrel-laden wagon. Fresh meat smelled good, and every other man seemed in high spirits, chattering and laughing, tearing into meat and vegetables. Vanya grabbed a cut of meat and a potato stabbed onto a long thin silver dagger with a black handle, delivered it to Sick in his car bed. Had his father done much of this on his winter visits to old and ill? Sick was sitting up now, and actually clambered over firewards with Vanya once he had eaten. They had sat together, two of them, in friendly silence amidst laughing men. As night fell, one man with a particularly shabby hat took some recently raw lambskin and started to scrape it. Stars started to fade into view, and their fire was hurriedly stuffed out. They all gathered branches and set up little rough wood stands where they laid out their bed rolls. Vanya followed suit, too tired to notice as White-Mane tapped a couple of men who walked off towards their clearing’s edge.

Now, dawn woke him as he rolled off his branches- Vanya was discovering a lot of very sticky sap coating Coyote’s borrowed bedroll. He got to his feet- sore and painful in his boots. He unlaced them and saw his feet white and dead and puffy, and he let out a little gasp. Marat came over to him, looked at his feet, and shook his head. “Boy, you can’t sleep with your boots on. Don’t you know anything?” and then he cuffed Vanya’s head sharply, knocking him to dewey ground. Breakfast was long pulls from a tanned animal bladder full with rich fermented milk, and they were back in saddles altogether too quickly for Vanya’s aching thighs. At some point, around midmorning judging from sun-height, or maybe a later millenia’s afternoon judging by his aged spirits. “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me, a sinner” How had he sinned? “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me, a sinner” He had never been to forward, he had been generous with his beer “Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me, a sinner” echoing through his mind, he had even given his bitter old staunch atheist of a father a burial with a cross. Not in a church yard- Konstans had not budged- but still... He managed to catch Marat amidst Valdin’s horde by deftly maneuvering around men who might have been swearing at him with foreign words tossed about like strange coins. “Marat,

how much longer will we be? I just came to shoot a few rounds, and we're going so far that your friend at my cabin might be lost. I should get his horse back to him soon I think." Marat turned, a look as hard as blue steel in his eyes. "To leave now would betray our position, boy." He tapped two black metal pistol-grips at his hip. "I think you'll get my meaning when I tell you Vildan can't have that." Vanya fought to keep tears of fatigue from welling up. "I don't know what I'm doing here sir, I'm confused and tired, and, and," he started babbling. Marat put a strong hand on his shoulders. "Vanya, you've got yourself this far. Maybe you shouldn't have come back with your big mouth ranting about proving yourself, picking fights with us, selling your plot for a place in our band. I won't even mention things you said to that poor girl in front of her father, or other things besides words flowing out. But you're here now. You've made your choice. It's time to be a man of iron, and stick to it. Running like a boy won't save you from consequence."

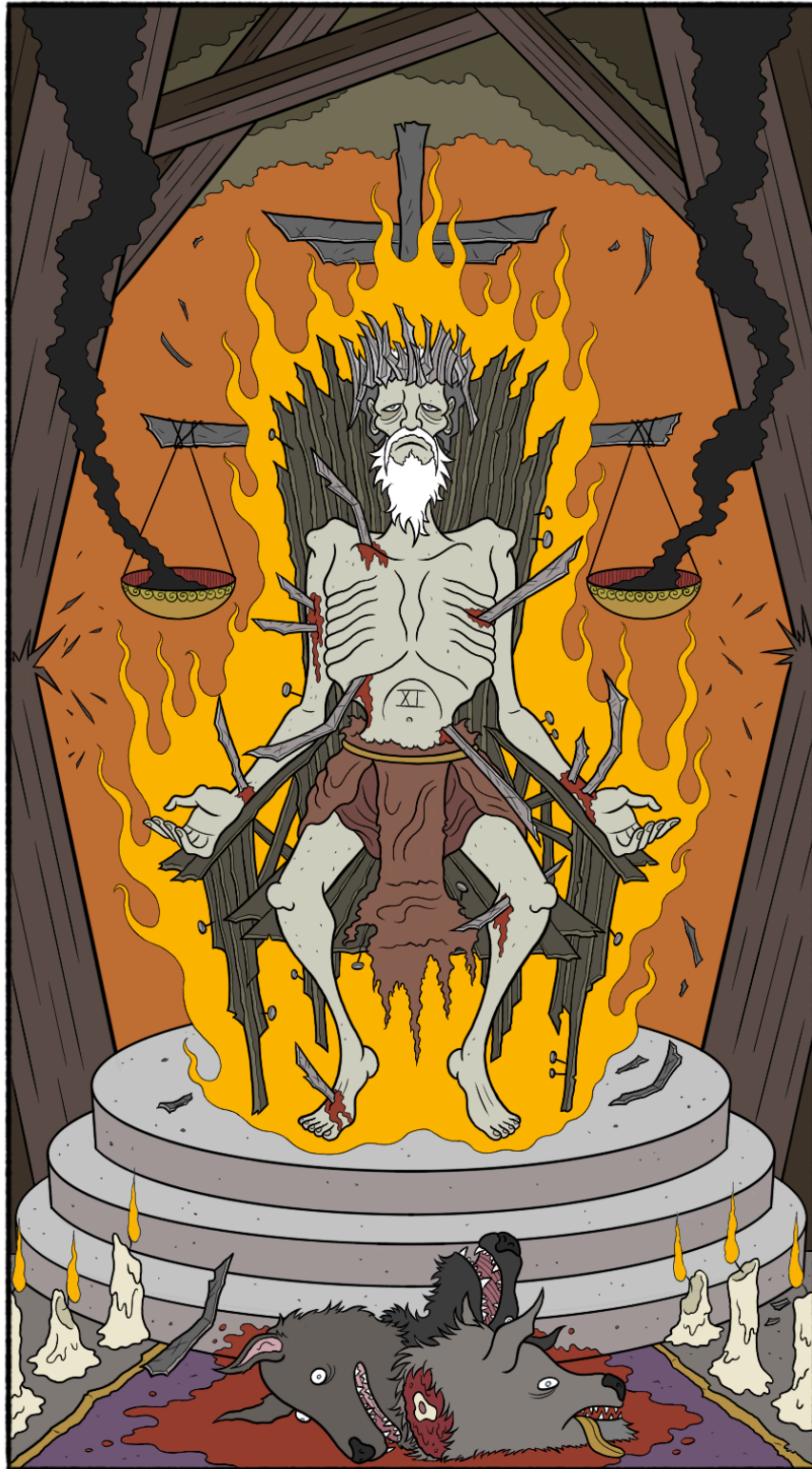
Vanya and horse, still nameless, sank rearward, closer and closer to Sick's thrumming metal machines. What lies had Coyote told his band about him? What had he done to deserve this? How did "a girl" -God was it Valentina, involved? He was more lost than before. No answers, no memories, no comfort from prayers. Could he be a man of iron? His father, what would he have thought with his strong arms wasting away in that shitty little stupid fucking cabin, winter rains dripping through its leaky roof, his father's rasping bloody cough at all hours. Father's little strange fairy-tale about old martyrs and men from Mars, there in those stories men had been iron, shared blood and dark arts. Had his father been iron? Had he shared blood, drinking his bloody coughing lungs to death? What was he going to do? Could he even get away? Fuck, fuck, fuck, profanities his father had died saying pouring out of his own lips, profaning them before God. If he rode back, would Valentina even speak to him? He remembered sympathy at her eyes' corners, sympathy stuck in his mind- but he remembered too, disgust in her eyes' centers.

He found himself riding alongside Sick's chugging iron machine, behind rusting gun ports, alongside Sick who rode it like a royal litter. He was engrossed in some wide paper with colorful shapes and lines and words in a foreign alphabet covering it. His horse snorted which caught Sick's attention. He looked up and over Vanya's face. "You're *der* village boy" he said in his characteristic accent, like a foreign language with real words pasted over strange sounds. Vanya nodded. "Do you remember of... night?" Vanya started to say that of course he did, he wasn't a fool, he didn't just forget things- but he was already broken down. He reached around to scratch his head, thinking a little, "You know, that's happened to me many times. Sometimes no problem, sometimes problem. Don't worry about it. Good group here. Name?" "Vanya, Sir" "Well Vanya, you call me Jo, no sir, I just ride truck here" OK Vanya signed. "Good group. You do well. Learn from men. You do well Vanya" Then Jo turned back to his papers. Vanya rode along. After a while he decided that this was a strange and great adventure. He could do it. He would do it. He was here, if it was God or an Iron will which kept him, it kept him.

Going was getting slower- there had been rain here, and roads were now muddy with Spring, and Valdin's long chain of horses tore it up more. They started to fan out, trying to leave some solid ground for heavy iron cars. Vanya and his horse meandered out left, moving between trees and bushes, Coyote's horse- his horse- occasionally jerking off to eat something, and Vanya jerking back to keep it moving. Here it stopped for some green shoots, there to nibble at grass, Vanya growing more and more

frustrated, *his* horse growing more and more leisurely. He kept glancing over his right to check that he was still in line with other riders- he didn't want any mistakes made about his determination to continue, or their determination to stop him with a bullet if he didn't. Now his horse stopped for a little pale yellow ball of new flowers on forest-floor. "Alright you silly beast, if you want flowers so much, flowers you will be. Move Primrose. Move!" and he spurred 'Primrose' forward. Maybe he would pick some flowers for Primrose when next they stopped, feed it half, put another half tied on its head like some crest. Something like that, some little dream kept his spirit up, and so with growing enthusiasm he kept moving across greening landscapes of mud.

14: Come and See



In a dream, he was standing alone at a card table in an almost empty airport. The flight out from the desert stop-over was delayed for another two hours, courtesy of a "sandstorm" although the tremor an hour before made him think "atom test" instead. He sighed, and walked back to the Indian Casino Bar for another round of roulette. The attendant sitting at the wheel was stuffed into a suit made uncomfortably short for his lanky body, and well-combed black hair was pulled back into a tight pony-tail leaving his clean and sharp face, sensitive dark eyes, soft round nose and loosely smiling pecan lips free of any wayward strands. A glass of whiskey sat on a napkin beside the wheel, and beads of desert condensation sweated out on the cool surface. "Hello again Mr. Wild-Horse. Care to get the wheel spinning?" The attendant smiled back at him, tight lipped. "If it isn't my favorite customer, back as always. Flight delayed still?" "It always is. Feels like there's no exit from this interminable airstrip." Across the gaming hall another patron stood and stared blankly at an empty table, flipping over card after card. "What's his deal, Tony?" "Some bum who doesn't need us to make this miserable I guess." The casual callousness of the attendant gave him a thrill of pain. "Well, let's take a look at this wheel... twenty-three is always a good bet... but I' think'll go a little off the beaten track, how, how about sixteen?" He brushed Tony's starched penguin-suit sleeve with his hand as he placed down the chips and was received with a glare of hot hate. His heart felt sick. The wheel began to spin faster, the patchwork of red and black turning round and round.

Dark nights towards arctic darkness were best spent in well lit mines, one hundred hand hewn feet under rock. He and others, covenantal brothers, had spent winter's heart toiling here amidst high slopes where frost thickened into Earth's leather overcoat and all light vanished for weeks. But seasons changed, and now mines were closing as thaw came to ground and wetted mud, and snow melt threatened collapse. It was almost time to take their earthly spoils to Eastern hunting grounds for lazy summer days of fat and meat.

Ironwood buds were starting to thicken, velveteen pellets of new life, a rosy carapace readying under spring dawn's violet crepuscule. Silence. Then a breath. Behind silent pulse-drums in his ears, in blood-flow and heart-beats, flowing like water into wine, Jesus's Prayer cycled through him. Trees, perched above mossy trunks and dank soil, had thin gray leathers of bark over muscled trunks, where just now sap was flowing upwards. Silence. Then, a breath. He moved his fingers gently down prayer-knots and string, smooth black cord and rippled, twisted diamond knots, placing one cloth wrapped foot directly in front of another. Gentle steps elicited no complaint from soft Earth, silent treads. Then a breath, a gust of air from heaven. He looked ahead as prior steps pushed themselves out of ironwood shadow and climbed small Easthen-crests. Up there, it was blue-green pine, eternal from April to April, yellow August pollen and winter snow-coat its only sign of yearly cycle. Below him, sloping soil raged higher, and his breathing became harder, breaking silence with ragged, tumbled aspirations. Early spring's sun was lancing through matinal mist, driving it west, as he at last reached his peak crowned by byzantine stonework, his monastery. He took one deep breath and then broke silence with an immediate gasp as he carefully swung one heavy oak bucket, carefully engaging every straining muscle in his core, each in its turn feeling ready to burst, as at long last two bucketfuls- one of water, second of fish, came to rest. He took a moment to pant out exertion's heat, sweating palms on his brown robe's coarse sackcloth. He lifted an arm, using sackcloth to wipe brow-sweat away, cupped some water in his hands to scrub and spit and sneeze into. Tossing his waste to Earth's sponge, ready again for his daily toil, he stood.

Early mornings down amongst fish warrens were always better than diving right away towards mineshafts, even in spring chill. Melting clumps of snow scattered around in shady places or glowed like butter melting in sun. It froze at night yet but he now found days tolerable in just buckskin. Fins glittered, wet with water and red with blood, as more fish came out of sparkling stream water. Fish-oil, strong and fresh smelling, caused his mouth to water- but they had a purpose to serve beyond base satisfaction, a deep rite which was their reason. Coarse hemp rope went in where their throats had been slit, just underneath gasping laibullar gills. Thick brown fibers looped through gaping mouths and then tied together in a firm knot just above silver lips, line against line. He had twelve fish, a godly number, sufficient for his task he thought. Heaven had brightened into a cheery spring morning when his first task was finished with all ritual ornamentation. Borrowing ice-cold water from oak, he rinsed his hands once again before hoisting a full bucket up, bracing it against his shoulder, and walking into his monastic sanctuary.

It was a low building with a roof that sagged centrally- pinnacle to pinnacle it couldn't have been 10 feet. It was all logs, done in mud to match Constantinople's granite, shaved of bark and soaked with pine tar and yellow clay, leaving it smelling strongly of trees and Earth. Evergreen branches, stuck into tar, and freshly replaced every two weeks when once snow's preservation ended, masqueraded buildings as nature, and even on lonely hilltops like his, no exception could be made from Heaven's demon eyes. A collage of fox and dog skins made a mean door, adding an eruption of tanned leather in orange and pale gray to green-brown pincushion. Inside, yellow clay and torchlight dominated. It was a single room, 30' long and 15' wide. First thing that you saw as you opened hide flaps was a massive pit, center right, under cut chimney hole, aided by heavy iron tubing rising up. On moonless nights, they'd abandon smokey pine for rich, rare, red hot charcoal which would smokelessly provide heat during blinding dark and limestone white nights and days of frost and snow. Immediately after this, a giant barrel with a huge curving glass lens appeared, a saucer of crystal mounted in enameled iron. Near-side of their hearth stood a variety of metal implements, knives and bowls and black rocks of iron, and it was to this site that he brought his bucket of water, journey complete.

Far side of that room, around glowing embers, seven beds were arranged in a semicircle, lined with bundles of furs. With sunlight around him and it having been raised for a good time, he thought to wake his boys and grabbed a steel pot and a wooden spoon and began clanging. "GOOD MORNING BASH-GIR!" Immediately six fur blanketed forms twisted at command. Three were up in a flash, pulling on flaxen suspenders and brown leather leggings, tossing up tunics, one cheery, one furious, one already struggling against spring's floral pollen front. He kept clanging away- a fourth man-shape moved so slowly from his bed they called him "Marcus Aurelius", a fifth was so extremely shy even in his own home he scarcely appeared to an eye's gaze, and sixthly one seemed caught in his own sheets. An ordinary morning for these boys, he thought. Even those bleariest of them were moving too, they each grabbed buckets and began to make their way downwards to rushing water for morning washing.

While this ritual was underway, he moved behind clay-bound pine boughs outside to check wires. They were still good of course- no corrosion, no tears, a spool of copper wrapped in stainless steel, coated in a black jacket of rubber. An artifact from richer days, coming from Eastern foundries while they had yet stood. But, like

him, despite its age, it still served its function. Hardware present and duty-fit, he walked down towards other bough-masked buildings.

His first stop followed that snaking copper coil brought him to a chapel-proper. It was small, and sparse- they had once had gilt appropriate for Lord Jesus, but it had had to sell, of course. Now, purple silk was replaced with spartan wool, paltry tar-incense burned in a tin cup replete with holes and modifications, and even His iconostasis was faded and stripped of ornament. Its central graven figure, less faded than all others, and in a proper pre-Nikonian style, was that most blessed martyr, a stern lion of a man in adorned headscarf, greeting him as silently as ever. Under its pine mask, roof staves were still tenderly ornamented with dyes from Earth's bosom. Smoke blackened blades of steel rotated slowly heavenly gusts, powering electric candles below from their hiding place amongst roof-stuck fir. Behind screens of venerable images, everything was in order, crackles and popping green lights and functioning wires, so he moved quickly to finish his checks. Towards a valley-bottom, one last structure stood. There was no guiding wire now, only guiding memory. Here was of construction of low quality, wood full of dark knots in weathered gaping gray planks. Smells around it were starting to ranken, but inside, there was a deep pit whose walls seemed firm enough still. His worst, most unclean work done, he moved back peak-ward along an alternate route, littered with empty snares, left sprung and hollow since winter's leanest months were behind them and easier food was around. Since they would have had to salt any red-fleshed squirrels or hares for lent's fast he hardly cared about his failure.

He meandered their trapping trails slowly. Revenants of autumn leaves slowly sinking into earth, or earth slowly rising into them, either or both formed a soft blanket for his treads, a silence filled with breathing and replete with prayer's supplication. When he had remounted his hill-peak, yet cloaked under eternally protective branches of fir, his six brothers were still slowly hauling their daily water up towards him. "Doctor Jugozvilli, Tovarisch Yvegenivich!" one called out, "look out from above!" extending a comically small arm out gesturing behind him. "You won't get me today, Vassil" he responded as stern and dry as possible. Only fitting then, that an avenging angel taking form as a defecating pigeon, nailed him dead on his long brown hair. It took him half a breath to avoid cursing, and another half breath to resume his constant prayer. "It appears, brother Vassil, that I was fooling myself today. I beg your pardon." He attempted to preserve authority with solemn composure as his brothers burst into laughter below.

Despite Gennady's constant sneezing, he was first to notice something. Amidst his hill-bound brothers, held up by his nose, but propelled yet by his grit, he stopped, sniffed, and then sounded off a tremendous explosion. "It smells like fish!" he announced, and then hachooooed again. Mischa roughly demanded how he could smell anything in his condition, and then haughtily returned to powering ahead, just behind Vassil. Dima trailed behind, middle-most, conspicuously falling to be inconspicuous. Behind him, Vaylon appeared in a trance, meticulously trying to keep his bucket of water level and contained, and failing with every earthbound step en route. Finally Slava trailed far behind, appearing to sleep walk. He was extremely talented, but strict disciplinary demands of their early mornings presented an almost insurmountable challenge for his sleepy young soul, far more than for his brothers. Still, he was climbing, and still sun had not risen gold from its pregnant orange bloat through red-gray hazes of Eastern forest smoke.

Climbing's vertiginously difficult nature surpassed, it was time for daily auto-reification to begin. Each in turn went inside with their own bucket, and each in turn re-emerged with chunks of black steel in hand. Spreading out across their pine covered peak, his men searched out areas warmed by sun and stripped down. Seeing that everything was underway as it ought to have been, Yvegenivich went inside and fetched his own iron, moving to his accustomed spot. As sun warmed air rose around, a rich fishy scent increased- he knew it would be strongest nearest him, but he hoped that it wouldn't be too obvious, at least too quickly for his boys. He pulled off his rough cloth tunic, standing nude and feeling older than he had ever felt before, as he did each morning workout. A gentle breeze was rolling up, rich with spring flower scent (and pollen- poor Gennadi!) which was incredibly refreshing, just a slight enough chill to bring discomfort, a worthy thing to struggle with. He bent over, stretching out and exposing himself to fresh breeze, and then squatted down to begin his ritual supplication of body to metal. His legs, muscles tight and tense around bony kneecaps, screamed in childish protest as he stood, crying for his first repetitions, them screaming, but soon sculpting tears in their fiber replaced any pitious wails with mercy's steady petition, mimicking his heart beats incessant cries of *Gospodi! Iisuse Hriste! pomiluj ma*. After completing this campaign, standing up and locking his hot legs erect, wasn't that mercy so sweet? Was clemency's joy only possible if laxity's punishment was appropriately harsh? He told himself that it was so, that belief willed him to Know that it was so, for if it was not so, then perhaps this pursuit was only sadism refined to oneself.

He proceeded to work on his arms, beat and break them in order to make them better, pulling apart muscle as he would churn garden compost, tearing dirt to make it bloom and grow. Was beauty's pleasure worth action's sacrifice? Sun was higher now, and although still pale from its wintery recess, his skin began to warm and soften in its beams. Rotating his shoulders, feeling metal's pull as it longed to return earthwards from whence it had been ripped, feeling pull after pull in his arms as they longed to return slack to his side, he forced them onward. Like with men, so too with his arms- he had to know when to push, and when to halt; when he had first arrived here, to learn from Blessed Martyr Yvekio himself, in those early days he had so completely shredded his body in youthful excess and desperate pursuit that they had rebelled and refused even to bring him water to drink for days. Now, however, he had learned to lead, to read his body and read messages in postures and grimaces of his men as they were transmitted through flesh or luminous words. That learning he had undergone here had been more rigorous and more fulfilling than any learning from Tashkent or Novosibirsk's great seminaries, to illuminate one's mind in personal contact with a living, divinely loving martyr.

A sheen of sweat upon his skin, a thunder of vital blood in his ears, he set down his steel burden, and lay upon grass in solar warmth. This time, for a full pound of his heart, he felt that Lord Jesus was full of mercy, that he could pause his supplication. A next flood of blood in his veins pushed that thought distant from his mind, and prayer's drumbeat of exercise resumed. This was their utmost task- to build bodies with care as a temple or a walled garden, for Lord God, and in meager lent-time, between winter mining and summer hunting, they used steel. In fact, summer hunts this far north were easy times, compared to cold dark mines or ceaseless repetition in static place, not many roving tourists from cities shouting "Heia Safari!" and driving game into their wicked machine-gun slaughters as they might westward yet. Also, it

was good to put on tan weight to make an impressive show for wandering Cossacks when they came to collect rents for their Great Father.

A hot spring sun made it unseasonably warm, and a low continuous Western breeze continued to roll on high, blowing smoke and fish-odor from their fire-rack hanging places. Time to break. If it hadn't been lent, they would have supped, but it was, so he gathered his brothers for another series of drills involving rubber masks. It had been almost a quarter of a decade, longer than some of them had been alive, let alone living here, since they had been needed, but one never knew when a launch would take place. And hell, when Cossack's came for tribute- surely their precious illegal wires were hidden; and yes, their garden fields and buildings were cloaked in obfuscating green tree-shadow; but green-yellow clouds of sickly gas had rolled uphill before. His goal was 10 seconds. This was challenging in itself, and combined with clumsy latches and old pockmarked mask-rubber, it was nearly impossible. He tried to mimic such stress as he had felt so long ago, teach his boys worldly ways, instill panic by emerging suddenly from fir-boughs, mask on, yelling "MASK! MASK!" and hitting hard man-calves (were they his boys, or his men?) with sticks, but every conceivable variation would grow old compared to real fear and pain borne on hot wind. No bruise could match halogenated scars. And that was assuming that it wasn't some new nerve gasses being tested against non-beings like them. But, sinners all, they prayed that Lord Jesus Chirst, son of God, would have mercy on them. Sweat gushed behind thick tan chunks of rubber and blocky quartz lenses, Gennadi struggling in vain against waves of sneezes filling his nose-piece with snot, and then they were all on, from high-spirited Vassil to clumsy Dima, 12 seconds, 13 seconds, 14... but they were on. After every mask came off, as rubber's stench vanished and wet sweat was blown dry, for a second in between his breaths he thought he heard an industrial roar of engine and distant hoof-beat. Then silence and breathe again. Was he losing it?

Mid-afternoon came with yellow sun beaming high from pale blue sky. Heralding change, a Cossack corp's horn blast sounded. They were early this year. Of course, smelted ingots of copper and hunks of ores of platinum and titanium and malachite that they had moiled for were there, and enough to buy safety for another year- after all, if Huns could get them to dig for it, why bother doing such a task themselves? But these were Cossacks- they were loose cannons, hungry wolves, afraid of their Great Hunnic Father but not enough to resist taking some vile initiative themselves. They all set down their steel weights and, wiping sweat off, wrapped on their jackets. A wood cart, rough and unfinished with only a flatbed and handles, was loaded with any excess furs from winter traps along with an allotted weight of metals that was customary. All together, belting on their hunting knives and old long rifles, more for ceremony than real use, they moved down-slope where Hitler's cavalry awaited.

A stout car, thick plates of metal jutting off from its sides, all painted gray-green and dapple sat in amidst fields which sprouted young shoots out from frozen taiga slopes riverwards. An evil looking barrel of a cannon sat on top of a boxy vehicle, gazing up towards their sacred mountain home. Men, wolves, some hanging on their truck, others mounted on a chain of horses, all dressed in drab gray vests and furs, thick with pockets, adorned with wolfskin cloaks which peaked wicked ears over their steel helmets with empty, dead pelt-eyes. A Corps-Leader, Old White Tooth, dismounted, leaping down off his big turret. "Will y'invite us to y'r abode?" he rasped out in something approximating *lingua frontierre* yiddish, or maybe just broken

German. Usually they handed over their cursed share of metal in silence, so this was both an unexpected greeting and an unwelcome request. "Or d'y've a spring sacrifice, some fine hill virgin waiting up there for a hard dagger? Bring in new life with a little *new* life of yers own?" Doc, Yvegenivich, could only stare blankly back. Behind him Gennadi sneezed and Slava yawned. Vassil let out a spurt of nervous laughter. He had to forestay Mischa putting his kicking-foot shaped mouth out into danger. White Tooth spoke first- "Perh'ps outta send Yellow Tongue here to check it out. Don't want ye holding out on 'us." Thinking this over between breaths, Doc was yet silent when White Tooth spoke up again. "In case yers deaf 'n can't hear, we can makes it clear fer yeuse." He gestured a gray arm towards his big gun-mount, making it perfectly clear. Breathe in- he could reach down and out again with his knife, slit White Tooth's foul Tatar's gullet with it like **that**, or take him hostage... but would a pack of wolves like this who served a Great Father in Kazan and a satanic All-Father in Valheol really hesitate to kill their own leader? It wasn't reliable insurance, and he still hadn't thought out what this all could be about- breathe out. "Alright", keeping his face as impassive and impressive as he could, no emotion, no weakness, a stubborn communist as distant as Ural peaks in red sunset.

Yellow Tongue, evidently shortest of these short Westerners, and as foully unwashed as all else together, walked up. Clearly, these were no Muslims with their grooming habits- bloodthirsty Heathens, filthy and wicked as sin. Perhaps that was why they had mocked them over sacrifice. Well, which of them was it that martyred pious faithful? "How are times in town?" he asked Yellow Tongue. "Well," he replied, evidently with a much stronger grasp of Russian inflection than his chief, "It's a little iffy ever since old man gone and died." Their Governor dead? "Seein' as all them *Schutzmanns* think that cossacks like us are hardly better than you fucking animals, we gotta find insurance." He said it so casually that it didn't register at all for Doc, for a span of several breaths as they trudged up wet spring hill-sod, moving between trees. Insurance? What did that have to do- ah. Mines. Metals. Much better for them to take their mines directly with slaves than to play as haggling merchant-jew types if race fanatics and purifiers were acting up. That meant- breathe in. His forest was wet. Wet enough for tar and spring greening to make a veil of smoke? "Vaylon, Slava, pilgrim vittles, now. Nothing you can drop or spill. Mischa, tar. In our charcoal shed. No, wait. Gennadi, tar, Mischa- fish are smoking-" He grabbed Yellow Tongue, pulled his knife out and carved open his throat, foul stink of wolf pelt and unwashed dog-soldier mixing with flowing fresh blood, "-grab a stick for a firelighter. Dima, with me" keeping dopey Dima with him. He dropped to ground and unslung his long rifle.

Space in between breaths was sacred, a space where killing happened as much as where living paused. An old telescopic sight, glass ground before he had been born and preserved with delicate care and attentive cleaning for three generations gave a true aim still. Old brass rounds were always a risk, threatening that they wouldn't fire or that they might blow out a chamber. Breathe in. Tatars, wolf pelts walking like ghosts against spring's gray-green-brown taiga, pausing to smoke and chatter, leaning against their tank, White Tooth opening his mouth to laugh- his round was good, his aim calm and true. White Tooth's cossack head splayed red against steel plate, body collapsing, mouth still agape lined with ivory fangs and pink gore. Immediately other cossacks dropped down and began firing towards them, woodline-wards. They were no slouches- hard frontier criminals only got to be hardened instead of dead in one way. He and Dima waited for their first burst to finish, relying on buckskin camouflage and hardwood masking to express divine will in protecting them, and then they leapt up,

running for slope-peaks. Big rounds from spat from armored turret cannons came forth, spraying huge chunks of lead indiscriminately, and Dima dropped down in fright, screaming. No spray of red, nothing, he was just panicking, no time to be a dope out here, Dima, he pulled him up, "we've got to keep moving!" huge zipper sounds ringing out behind them, trees splintering, cracking, softer pine breaking in two where it was hit, contusing splinters hitting hard muscle, keep your eyes as narrow as slits to avoid deafening splinters, Oh God My God right past his ear, where on Earth were his brothers, here, and there, carrying big buckets of tar, ducking and crouching, and then they were up on top, behind a ridge, get down, get down, pretty safe, breathe in, Lord Jesus Christ breathe out, breathe in breathe out breathe in Have Mercy on Me, breathe out.

They had made it. It took many breaths to bring him back to baseline, but they hadn't gone up in a straight line, instead cutting back and forth along sawtooth footpaths. Already thick black tar-smoke and burning pine and soot were forming a great wall between them and pursuing cossacks. Space to breathe. If there was one thing that Blessed Eastern Martyr Yvekio had taught before his righteous immolation, it was that there was never space "to breathe" only space between. If cossack soldiers out there had a single ounce of initiative, if they felt real pressure to get to mine shafts, then they would be moving already, not through fire and smoke, but around to one side. There was no way they could hold against twenty some men and a car and cannon, even if cossack would chop half a hill down to drive up it. "Slava, up our staves. See where they are, and toss our wire down." To leave their tower was bad enough- their only contact with worlds beyond, sources and purposes of their convent existing for that wider world of Goodness (although, he couldn't have imagined it mattering to them in their mountain autarchy two hours ago). If they could preserve their wire, they could build a new tower. He sent Gennadi, still sneezing, maybe from tar fumes now, to collect wire downslope, another four brothers to double check their packs and make sure everything was in order for a march North to summer hunting grounds. They would run to their hills, run for their lives, if only they could make these Tatars hold distance. Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy.

His muscles burned as he ran down a reverse slope to their chapel. Their iconostasis would have to undergo a ritual immolation, an act of Martyrdom. They could not leave it behind for divine images to be despoiled with filth, and nor could it be transported, Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy. His big arms moved it aside, straining against weighty gilt wood, oiled figures of beauty and grace. Behind it sat an old analog uplink machine and their little wind dynamo-battery. They could trade for wiring and metal posts to replace it, hopefully, God willing; he took a converter and, squatting down to hold its bulky box of circuits and plasticine display, he lifted up. Every fiber in his core screamed as he pushed himself back upslope, muscles burning in ritual ablation and physical duty. A second cart, this time with depth to hold things in was there and ready, and so delicately packed into bedrolls and furs, that machine went, followed by coiled wire. Slava, even sleepy Slava seemed awake now, yes Slava reported that they were mostly moving left, armored truck with its big drum magazine gun moving into rills around hill-back, another eight or so on horse moving around rightwards. Only one way to go- through their own fire. This was do or die time, dare to die time. A jewel was a jewel, even shattered, Yvekio had said as he poured kerosene over his body. "Slava, take our cart, move through our fire, run if you need to- it's still mostly smoke and not too many hot coals yet. You should make it without much more than singeing your buckskin. Dima, Waylon, Gennadi, you cover him. Vassil, you'll be

on point, so get out ahead. Mischa, as long as you don't curse too much, bring up our rear. I'll hold them here as long as I can. God be with you." Slava blinked back tears. "God be with you too, Doc" but Yvegenivich was already climbing up staves and tower-clay, muscles alight and numb from pain, insensitive to stinging pine needles, breath moving in and out, coursing relentlessly and mercilessly through his body. His brothers, his boys started downhill towards lines of eye-watering smoke as Doc reached tower-top. Did his boys have their masks?, he suddenly wondered. Too late to call out and turn them around.

If those Tatar's had been smart, maybe if old White Tooth had been alive, they would have left a man with a heavy automatic to cover tree-line and smoke-line, but he suspected they were out for blood, and dumb tatars, and hackles all up to boot, so they wouldn't be so canny. God bless him, no gun opened fire as good-spirited Vassil first, then their cart, his boys, and finally ever-angry Mischa pushed away from their winter mining hill home. On top of his tower, an Icon of his most Blessed Martyr, his bandana with Cross over Rising Sun, stern face gazing at him stood. His chest tattoo of Christ Pantokrator gazed back. They would be here together, with him, at his end. Come and see, they said. And he saw. He had four rounds left, all that there was in this old magazine. There were bottles of pine-tar and charcoal dust, and a fiery torch. That was all. His Martyr's unflinching gaze looking at him, lovingly, longingly transcending any thin superficial art to Sacred space.

In an eternal space between breaths of life his mind exploded, prayer collapsing into a dizzying fractal of emotion and knowledge. Hell of an April Fool I make, imagine if these Heathens get a good spring after this and think it's because I burned today. Rifle out, scope on their car, aim for- shit, steel treads, it's a half-track, of course it is in this country, steel plate, no good. Have to hope it gets closer. That rill has smaller trees, they can push through scrub in an iron monster like that, will they? Their truck does. Shot one brass round at an eager man, hits his legs as he's rushing a clearing, brings scattered bursts of automatic fire, somehow they haven't seen any shot from his tower. Maybe it's masked in smoke. Decades of hunting, I'm as deadly a shooter as any on our frontier, and besides they're all in wolf pelts. Funny, that. I shot those wolves to sell to those self-same Tatars, and now he's shooting them again, like ghosts or evil spirits. Vengeful. Coming home to roost. Second shot. My arms are tired, lungs gasping in smoke, sweet fresh hell of a pain over those chlorine scars. Still, it's veiling my watch-tower. For all this talk I couldn't remember my mask. Those lenses would kill my eyes. Their half-truck thing is half way up, almost close enough. Maybe I don't even need to hit it if these pines around it go up hot enough. Crank bolt, chamber round. It's stiff, old, gun grease is hard to come by, and animal fat doesn't really cut it. Fuck. My bolt is staying stuck open, now I really have to pound on it, Lord Have Mercy, Lord Jesus Christ Have Mercy on Me a Sinner, cursed bolt slams shut, third shot is already lined up. I can see yellow teeth of these men, evil dark eyes, or maybe it's just dark-eyed yellow-fanged pelts they wear, shrouded in smoke. They've got a lower tower now. That big gun is tracking towards me. One last shot at that drum magazine, maybe that'll punch its ticket. It ricochets off, ammunition under steel probably never even jumping. Crank my bolt, chamber again, my beautiful screaming muscles are weeping sweat, my smoke filled lungs crying mucus tears against bitter carbon. Trigger clicks empty. Nothing. That huge cannon goes off again, like a zipper only full of firecrackers, sawing trunks like spindles under it, some towers falling, breathe in, my loving Martyr is here and watching, feel his strength, push this tar

bottle into torchfire, see it start to catch, don't you dare breathe out, falling down
towards that big metal thing, don't you dare breathe out don't you dare

15: A Roaring Lion



In dreams he was hunted by Meat-Cutter, an inhuman shape, covered in pelts of wolves and Red scalps. It was the Transylvania of Nosferatu, where the woods all looked like the Odenwald, the peasants like half-red ghosts, and something evil in the air.

Deep in the countryside, scents of wet spring earth and mulch and moldering leaves hung rank in the hilly places. There had been a big amphitheater, halfway out of the Odenwald above Heidelberg, molten into the medieval castle, a stage built of crates of coffins under the great eagles and party banners. Albert Fleshacker, the speaker had risen to discuss the "Protocols," chanting about the natural inclination of man to dominate, about the drive that lay with in each of them, about their shared flesh united together, marching to a bright white light of destiny, when the scent of blood had filled the air. Boot polish, greasy and acrid gushed out of his face, covering his lips... a hundred thousand children, barely seventeen, tight cuts on their heads, little shoulders in baggy soldier suits marching out following the two pointing fingers of the Beast... Suddenly it was night, back in the Gods Grove of The City. Albrecht Fleischhauer was staring at him with those same eyes, blood dripping down from his chin. He smiled, showing two long sets of fangs where his canines had been, and then dropped onto all fours, vanishing with his pelts into the brush. His handgun sat in his hand, hot and smoking. Somewhere he felt he could see the wound that had driven into the paper-hanging rat-bastard snake-oil salesmen healing bloodlessly, sucking up the tissue and binding it back together, unwinding the clock, unblowing the wind of angels.

The clock unwound again. A ritual of blood and iron, neither positive nor brotherly, was unfolding in the crumbling ruin of the woodland amphitheater. Ulrich, a grandfather of Albrecht, was ranting, two fingers raised like a bishop, huge ornate crown of gold casting twisting shadows behind him, chanting, a zen drone, "beware the Jew, beware the Slav, the outlanders, the outland and all filth produced therein" amidst floods of gushing blood from between the podium steps, a red wave, filling the amphitheater, rushing towards them all, choking him, pouring into his nose...

Loose stone clattered and shifted underneath Father Yakov's feet, and for one flashing hot second he felt as though they might give way and send him toppling off firm mountainside trail into thin air. "Lord, not your faithful servant." His foot was held, and not let slide. Although he was not yet sixty, he felt every minute of his life weighing on his body and soul, sin as heavy as his long red vestment. Blood-red wool sparkled with gold brocade bathed in a crimson sunset, dipping perilously close to his feet with each step on this precarious road begging grace. Climbing upwards felt longer than his own long memory could recall, as if these mountains had grown over decades he had spent in wild cities along Pacific Coastline.

Inside his inner robe's pocket, he fingered his holy beads under, tired callouses catching on weighty gold sleeve. He felt one, flat, saucer-tablet of white graze his fingers, tempting them, offering sweet relief and aid. If he needed it. Silence from processionnaires behind him brought him to a start- he had frozen. More mechanically now he forced himself to keep walking along dipping stone snakes. How Lord Jesus Christ must have felt, cross-crushed and bone-dry! In his hand, ornate and ornamented with a heavy silver crucifix, his staff bore him more, holding a third of his weight with every climbing step.

Sun had vanished behind purpling peaks of diamond snow, casting verdant forested hillside and blighted drops of rusting pine into uniform shadow. It struck him, on this holy day, that as dry rusted trees evinced Christ's blood, then He had must have bleed much in recent years, for blight now rose in red tides of dead needles

up along mountain paths. Finally, in this somber state, his eyes were filled by towering walls- Holy Sepulchre of All Martyrs crowning so high a place. It sat atop a hill, chunks of carved granite and hewn slabs of mossy rock rising in a nave that looked as old as standing stones nestling in Ural valleys. It felt otherworldly, this land; foreign to that true cross which had dried under Levantine sun, foreign to Constantinople's marbled Mediterranean domes. But inside, under antique appearance of moss and stone, modern icons in a realist style belied its primevally rugged facade. Under beams of concrete and steel, swinging metal mounts from extinguished forges of Magnitogorsk swayed, spewing dusky fumes of rich frankincense, fine gifts from sympathetic westerners.

Outside this stone temple, a series of small, makeshift wood pavilions rose- this one for Orthodox Jewry, there for Sabbatarians, here for Pomorskie-heretics, here a meeting house for Communards, then precipitously close to a cliff, facing Southern skies a mosque, and then off shrouded in mist, bunches of hastily tipped stones veined with malachite. He felt ill, on this night, of such a memoried sacrifice to see heretics of every worst sort assembled around, peopling new crowds who would have viciously spat on his bloodied Lamb. Every time he saw them he was seized by doubt- how could he claim to fight for his people's souls when he tolerated damnable distance and disdain towards Salvation? Torn between commands to love, and hate borne by impotent difference, torn between duty and fear of failure. It was something like that with which Jacob had grappled all night long. Like Israel must have, he tossed and turned until dawn. Finally, chiming brass bells sang out to relieve him from lying sleep, raising his tired and sore body from shallow straw and wool padding that Sepulchre Brothers had set out for him.

After Great Thursday Matins had finished and processions of assembled brethren had drifted somberly towards nights of mourning, Avraam, his faithful youth, helped change him into his own somber black robes for trials to come. As it always was, mystic supper and future crucifixion loomed ahead. He thought about dismissing Avraam, but decided that at thirteen he might well come along. Christ had let his disciples try to last with him too. Dark was consuming each hill-path step, darker for each long shadow cast off by huge stone outcroppings and distant peaks, a sight that always sent an alien shiver through him, so different from steppe and flat farmlands of freer, warmer, more South-Western vistas. Ancient jags of forest painted hidden landscapes, barely revealed by Avraam's little halo of lamp light, coloring distant smudges into funeral pyres and smoky fingers on giant hands which longed to crush them flat at any provocation.

He risked a brief dormitoria visit, heart longing against his chest in high mountain air for sleep's sweet release. Hidden in apse shade, twenty yards down, windows of sleeping churchmen gazed out at sharp slopes tumbling East. Already flickering beeswax flames were dying, lighting lonely kitchen space. Two dozen brothers, mostly old, and their wards, mostly young orphans, all bound by silence, some violently mute, were exhausted from working to accommodate so many souls on this high peak. At most, in one year they might see a band of fleeing refugees or wordless merchants with crates of Red Arrows gingerly hoisted up mountain passes towards westbound cuts.

Shadow and darkness from western ridges flooded oven-lighted kitchen walls, and Father Yakov felt his eyes strain as shaking hands groped for food under tiny spurts of yellow candle light. They found bread and sheep's cheese and a little bottle of

frothy beet kvass, perfect for him and Avraam. Before bringing this meager supper- no wine, no lamb- to that kid, his hand sank into his pocket and a little tablet slipped from old fingers into folds of his cheek. Heart beginning to awaken, he left behind stoney kitchen drafts. With Avraam and his lamp ahead, they continued, down towards that lower garden, moving goat-like along rocky pathways into sacred space.

Above them, stars seemed to spin faster as he sank his tired back into an old stone bench. Although its rock hadn't been worked, just stacked with care, spring moss cushioned his aching muscle. He tried to focus, to keep himself alert in gathering darkness as birdsong faded away from blighted hillside. He thought of Christ in Gethsemane, how he must have felt. Yakov expected no cross, aside from his burdensome tasks of council that would break after vespers for Great and Holy Friday had been chanted. They would have to convene at odd hours in odd places, trying to tip-toe around a hundred contradicting proscriptions, juggling between demands of heretics, Jews, Pagans, Communards, and Muslims. They, he, would try- well, more than try, they would come to an agreement that would be acceptable to all scattered faithful. What else could they do before indomitable Maria Plamya? Working with those people was obnoxious *in extremis*, but it did not wear on him as heavily as carrying his Patriarch's endorsement to this black hill. It was for that hateful purpose that they had come to this far monastery, facing west and sheltered by primordial granite, all better to launch this proposed Confraternity from. It had pulled him away from his flock during Great and Holy week, away from his comfortable bed behind Nevsky Cathedral, away from town bustle over little paved streets, down through great tracts of wilderness into this jagged mouth of hell. It ate at his stomach, to think of what his Holy Father had instructed him to do- ultimately of course, he had agreed, but it bore him down like lead.

Dew beaded around mossy edges, bleeding into his vestments' sable, wetness turning cloth as black as Lucifer's heart. Little Avraam had nodded into sleep, his short shoulders propped against an ancient pine among wind-rustled ferns. Alone except for early springing sprouts, green and unturned by rusting beetle blight that swept clear forests from Nevsky Prospekt's antediluvian shores to roaring breakers of Kamchatka surf. Even garden bee-houses sat cold and silent and still under a rising half-moon, somehow still fat and round like an adorning halo above Mary Theotokos' dolorous and loving face. He felt tired and alone, searching for Salvation's voice in his heart and finding only doubts. Outside, fatigue scratched at his eyelids, wearing him down.

His thoughts drifted like stars towards future meetings. Reflecting light against his eyes, little pinpricks of heaven glittered down on him, like they must have on Christ as he prepared himself for thorny coronation, for great betrayals of his godly love. Those same stars had glittered down, reflecting off Nevsky Cathedral's great Gold Dome as fires had burned in streets and homes of his childhood, roads and yards pockmarked like his Grandfather face, scarred by bombs, and old friends' corpses. Prices of war, of freedom, of resistance. Broken bodies, more powerful than any icon, more soulful than any prayer, turning hearts into burning cups. And now his Church had said: "You, Father Yakov, must go and endorse this new Crusade for His Church". How many new bombs would Caesars send to his people, to his home? His heart burned with memories of old bodies, but already every sky borne star was charging west, beyond rocky outcrops of these mountains.

He had first grappled with this when his people's little communities, small farming settlements, microscopic mines, tiny trapping towns- all had begun to embrace Old Believer mannerisms, attempting to revive their culture; to abandon invaders ways in vain hope that faith would be rewarded with protection, that their lungs would not choke on sulfurous fumes, that their homes would not kindle under sunbursts of napalm. How could he be forced to enforce a faith, already winnowing in heresy's face? He was no Nikon, barely anyone at all, not even a man to some, no demon of steel and will like his grandfather had been- just a broken man looking. Could he bring himself to condone a secular crusade, take up a charge of telling men, boys, women- to kill, to die, alongside Jews and Communists for freedom's sake, for his people? And yet, how could he refuse that temptation, to proclaim with living words that idea- that God's winds had turned, that it was time to drive off another scourge from Mother Earth as had done before? Every beaten slave, every rape and murder in that barbaric camp called "civilization", every German Cain marking themselves out for retribution! Every slavish Abel called out for redemption, blood spilling into black earth, screaming "greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." But to actually condone a war- and worse, a war that *would* be lost, a war that would lay broken roads and children's bloodied bodies throughout old family streets?

Somewhere north, behind Little Iremel's night shrouded peak and its monastery's rocky rise, howling wolves shattered garden stillness. Were animals moving south again after twenty-five years? Above, moonlight had crested past zenith and was setting. Below, Avraam's rhythmic soft snoring was luring him to sleep. In his heart he could feel fading energy, metabolizing alkaloids pulling him towards a fateful sleep. If he could not keep a vigil, a day too early, and two thousand years too late, was that not exactly that venal hypocrisy that so many accused his Church of? And if his old lion's heart couldn't make it without foreign drugs, did that make him any different than one who fell into slumber? For a single soft pulse of his blood he felt weighty tradition and proscription driving him onward, that strength which drove Jewish communities to survive, and Subbotnikim to convert.

Many times he wondered about Old Believer churches and their splintered natures. Were they weaker for a lack of central authority and susceptible to sundry superstitious beliefs by whim of feckless locals? Were they stronger for their reliance on masses of faithful instead of a small circle of men like him, old, painfully aware in these dim hours of their own fallibility? Who would speak for them, condemn them and uplift them in this coming storm? Themselves? At least his choice was clear. His Church had always rendered unto Caesar. And if Maria Plamya was no Caesar, at least his resemblance was with her.

A rising sun, hidden behind Big Iremel's peak, dyed cloudless Siberian horizons blue as a robin's egg. Pale and faint against strong sun, a chalky moon was sinking south-west into craigs. Fatigue which had crept in was driven out by solar power. Below their garden outpost, dazzled by rainbow prisms of dawn, a firebird was taking wing, dry red pine needles splayed into magnificent bird wings rising in crimson flame against grim coniferous slopes. Above, ringing calls to prayer from Muezzin, who no doubt would awaken every guest. Tremors of guilt over his weakness and self-indulgence surfaced, shook and passed, not for a first time. He could always ask for forgiveness later, there was always time later for penitent exchange. Now, in broad color, there were deals to make, bread to break, and thirsts to slake. He shook Avraam

awake, and then they made their way back to monastic stone, passing to hello lift steaming samovars, bread, honey, and goat cheese waiting for their guests to break fasts, even as they would keep their own.

Guided along treacherous gravel by a novitiate named Andreii, they brought this sparse offering into a wide clearing of flat stones and soft needles where diverse and transient groups had prepared cooking fires tended by old men and young boys. Above crackling wooden altars where bread and milk warmed, high in fresh mountain air, streams of smoke and chants of prayer or Red anthem and allegiance rose. Pre-dawn robin's blue had hatched into an early day's pale brightness. Three novitiates were bringing spring lambs towards them. For peace and respect, for their nation and future, poor mountain monks proffered guests their most valuable possessions.

Outside a three-sided pavilion of green pinewood which passed as a Communist meeting house when it wasn't a barn, that woman stood. Maria Plamya, long braided red hair turned into copper flame by mountain sun, adorned in cream-white sheepskin bedecked with chrome steel and midnight leather too practical for jewelry. For a few chattered refrains too long of birdsong, Yakov was transfixed by her face, sharpley carved oblong cheeks and malachite green eyes. She seemed no less in command here on a westward trail than she'd seemed bringing her case before Holy Councils on Baikal's shores.

Pagans, late to rise, were only starting to trickle in as groups from Subbotnikim to Pentecostals and Pomorskie Charismatics began to share food around: dried fruits, pickled vegetables, aged walnuts, shriveled apples, barely bread, milks and sour creams. Meat was there for those who would take it: dried strips of goat and horse and squirrel; salted twists of river-cod and salmon. It was a cornucopia, and for a moment he felt that parable of fish and loaves had come to life. Muslims were observantly fasting and if they would, had already eaten in darkness before their prayer; Jewish men avoided dubiously butchered meat, and Old Believers still hungered in Lenten fast (lingering weeks longer, for no better reason than to be contrary). Bustling fireside introductions, and sips of hot Persian tea ceased when fifteen khaki clad communards tailed their leader, marching dead center into ringed cooking-fires.

In a clear and strong voice, an accent tinged with bitter rural inflection from Yeneisi's source, Maria Plamya thanked those assembled for their time, for their interest, for their courage. To take a risk like this, a confraternity with blood enemies, to set generational feuds aside and fill their holes with trust- truly a loving sacrifice, a necessary step to save their people, great and small, to stop killing tides and burning woodlands and an earth that was sinking into its own bowels. She gestured to one group, who Father Yakov saw only as Turkmen or perhaps asiatic pagans, "Ket" she said, who had suffered before our Apocalypse, our latter day Deluge, who fought with refugees, who had lost many people, especially under steely days of open war (at that mention, Yakov felt himself cringing with sour hate and guilt, an old familial blemish). Yet, despite all that, they had come here, following her. They saw that what would happen here was necessary, that this plague of locusts which cooked their homeland had to be turned back. She finished, turning from strong steely tones of a zealot into practical administrator, with a reminder that after daily services, evening campfires would bring a hammering out of practical points- following lengthy introductions of people and their demands.

This heralded a slow pace- not slow enough for elderly men and mystics, perhaps including Yakov himself, but clearly already obnoxious to several punctiliously uniformed communists and simple farm-preachers, elected by Pomorskieim and others. At his age, Yakov had come to appreciate lengthy ceremony and theater for nostalgia's sake, but he suspected many younger persons would roil in disdain at such "red tape".

Samovars donated and itineraries received, he and his brothers turned towards their monastery. Bound by backwards rural tradition as many of them were, novitiates and brothers alike were marked easily for forced introductions and cloying proselytization. First to speak to them as their attempted exit ground to a halt were Reb Jakov and Reb Yitzhak capped in magnificent beaver felt hats; followed by venerably bearded Mahmud Alim coated in bearskin and ammunition; Chief of pagan miners, strapping Slava Stepanovich, and his cleric- lean Fanir Izbulat Bjorgolibetsk dressed in wolf pelts, twined bark, and ochre; stern Isus and Boris Vadimov, brothers from Pomorskie with Eastern farms; and finally, for a brief moment of acknowledgement, Maria in her glory and her tatar dog Marat, his plucked chin above a stunning black leather overcoat, like an officer from olden days. In his simple black cassock and weary age, Father Yakov felt alone and torn by doubts. He alone was sole voice for that richest and most centralized (and certainly sanest) Church, but it was like being graced by a sun to see so formidable and legendary duo in person. But already sun had risen high over forty minutes of morning, and introductions were wearing thin into uneasy intellectual stand-offs. He pulled together novitiates and brothers, all departing to begin Royal Hours service for this Great and Holy Day.

He prepared below Church steeple, putting on a larger and more ceremonial gilt and silver black stole, cape and devout cap. Under weighty garment and foggy thoughts, he hoped he would not collapse. He hoped too, to find inside liturgical rhythm and verse, a will to reassure his own, strengthen his resolve for proclamations to come. Inside hulking granite and mossy gray stone, innumerable candles and stands of precious incense soaked sacred spaces in divine mist. Shimmering green malachite pillars, polished and marbled, towered down transepts towards giant golden icons fixing and shrouding mysteries behind. Huge wooden things passed for doors, ornately decorated with hammered mazes of bronze geometry and rusted red iron tacks. Today they were surrounded by an army of ornate muscovite icons, swarming angels and marching hosts. Some paintings were original, inspired by cataclysms that had brought men here, but much of it was stewed in Churchmen's written memory, in books of Icon painting, behind which divine light might enter this world. They were painted in reds and blues and molten orange-gold hues on plaster walls inside stone embrasures. Faithful gathered within, mainly monks, but also roving shepherds, traveling woodsmen, and even some rough riders and red reavers who were sliding down mountain spines honing on Maria's call. All stood in attendance of mystical remembrance. In days long past, he supposed, not even a village's laziest yokel would have dared leave a service of Royal Hours, stretching as it did from nine morning bells until seven at night (running later too, if not cut short to work around what passed for sabbath among apostates and Jews). Ural bronze and brass bells rang loud from steel and granite rafters, calling across deep valleys once, summoning long dulcet chants, inhabiting stone arches with their steady tone and clear words, somber and sober, so sober, singing of men's weakness and strength hidden therein.

Orange spring sun dangled low, even at this high latitude and altitude, sitting ripe and tantalizingly warm over south-eastern ridgelines of evergreen needles and straggling snow. Down in valleys below, white cloud-puffs of herded sheep moved, kept orderly and safe by dogs and shepherd children. Doubtless they were praying for luck with winter-hungry wolves howling down. Reluctantly, he bid farewell to lingering brothers and their simple but filling meal and company, mentioning to silent robe-bearing monks that he expected to return for an evening tea, and then collected Avraam for that burdensome meeting.

Yids and Subbotnikim had celebrated their Pascha a month ago, and so only had to contend with an oncoming Sabbath. He had heard of some Subbotnikim who kept to old Julian dating for Pascha, but evidently they were cozying up to Orthodoxy in mountainous cold. An early evening meal was being prepared over small fires for them. In severe contrast, old Mahmud Alim and his group were waiting for sunset and evening prayer to break their own fast. Hard anywhere, but especially with winter's nip still lingering in these high mountains, altitude draining water, and late sunlight from such northerly latitudes. For himself, his service had been grueling, and he now wanted nothing more than to collapse after so long awake, shaky strengthless legs longing to rest not standing near a fire, but laid out even on thin monastic mats. He let his hands drift close to scorching embers, seeing a jolt to awaken his fogging thoughtless mind.

Around them, unflagging Communists, supped as they walked on hard cheese, wine, and stewed oats, gathering all together, for Maria Plamya was to begin. Lit half by dipping sun and half by glowing fire, Red all over, captivating as a snake, her voice soft as velvet and yet firm as iron

We do not need a fairy tale or fantasy like that of Igor's Host. We need not Eisenstein's mythical technics of Holy Nevskys and Wise Lenins, but stories of our fathers and mothers in their own land and homes. All of our peoples are fierce and proud: from Tatar tribes to earnest farmers, great culture of high churches, (Yakov felt his cheeks redden) and industrious knowledge of miners who even in this world's edge keep working. Today, for our children, for ourselves, we need a story of these times. All of us have seen Adversary's birds of prey attacking homes, mines buried in our forests and clouds of poison seeping into our mines. Plagues come from their lands, and every year more of them cross Southern plains to take our gold and our water. Our ears pressed low, we hear how even squirrels tell tales of how they treat their slaves, raping and killing them. Our eyes are open wide and see as they break treaties with us, and push further and further into these mountains. Were that we could fly with falcons to see smoking lands from which despoil their air and cause our lands to flood and crack and sink.

One hundred years ago they stormed into this land, but in those days we were united behind Mighty Hand. In those days our people were as numerous as needles on these trees, and our people grew rich on black earth farms and frost-soaked taiga. In those days we made great works of stone and told great tales on film-tape, when our peoples knew Nevsky's face from cameras! We

were great and civilized peoples, all faiths, all united. When they returned, vainglorious princelings and cliques, ignoring our great hand, acting with no regard for each other, split. General Makhnia and High-Commander Tukhachevo raced each other recklessly for glory. Who can forget their folly, sinking so many of our grandfathers, young men in those days, into rushing waters and streams, bridges collapsing and legions falling into bogs? Torn asunder, stretched out, and then- every people splintering in fear or in vainglory. In those dark days we all splintered into ten thousand peoples of today across a hundred thousand villages.

Not even they, our mighty hands, guiding men of steel (She, thankfully, did not gesture to Yakov) and iron who died charging Adversary's forts, who drowned in Kalmius's green waters along Ugoletsk's black pits could stop them. Though then our ancestors yet had ways we do not, to cross lands in hours untouched by our Adversary's wrath, cloaked in mist and unmolested by wolves or rabid packs of men, two generations could not do what lays now before us. (She inhaled deeply, and then in a voice of unvarnished steel pipes and warming spring gusts) Because they could not unite, because they could not use iron to make our foe bleed on treaties yet signed!

Since then they have been a plague on us, on our lands, burning and consuming everything, leaving not an acre untouched or virgin, leaving not a child or a kolkhoz intact (Mahmud Alim clucked at this; Kolkhoz were not fondly remembered on Southern steppe) not a single herd free to roam; every year they push farther, take more, draining and polluting waterways to build more killing birds. Every year we splinter more, hate and feuds splitting brother from brother and town from town. They pretend to change- to stop poison gasses and claim that they alone can free their slaves. I tell you, they speak now of freeing them to send them out here, to our lands, because they hate and fear their slaves rising and want us and them here, beyond mountains, waiting year after year to see our tents shredded and our horses butchered in steel talons of their falcons. We can not tolerate this any longer. As we hate our parents, as we long to live like they did, our children will feel toward us. We must unite, unite now! We must march and fight in lockstep, ten-thousand strong, and let all know, for posterity and ourselves that hot blood still beats in our wintry hearts, that we are not children, not apes or bears to be hunted and discarded and told fairy-tale lies! That is why we are here tonight, on this high and sacred peak- for our very dignity, for our very freedom!

Even pacific and conservative impulses in him couldn't stop Father Yakov from nodding when Isus Vadimov said "Babylon has brought its own End Days. Hark, for they approach!" Mahmud Alim added with a creased smile above his peppery beard "My people say that they are Gog and Magog burst forth from Duhl Al-Qarnayn's Gates; or that they awaken Gog and Magog from their large sinkholes and thick blood of earth that they spi-ll into rivers"

We all agree they are a plague. But for one hundred years, many brave groups; Petty kings and confederacies in Midnight's land, great council fires of southern refugees and their Army of Popular Liberation, and every Khan of Tashkent, all have tried and failed to break Adversary's yoke. We cannot do it alone, and we cannot wait. We must act, and now while life yet runs in bodies and veins of their thralls- *our own brothers and sisters in bondage*, while they fight and bicker amongst themselves. We must stop them before they push further beyond, even unto heaven's stars! We shall stop them!

Mahmud Alim nodded. "Slav and Tatar have not always been friends. Even now many in Ummat al-Islam fight loyally under good men for their homes and families along great Western rivers in our foe's service; and tribesmen who claim Tengri's old eagle as their symbol, thinking they follow Chinggis, ride under that black eagle. But what you say is true; nothing stops their expansion, like a plague of locusts. Every year more farms further and further into our land. And behind them tanks. When they feud with us, they hide like cowards behind their machines, while we stand with our tents on a plain day. But how can we stop them, this people as numerous as needles on pine?"

This encouraged others- an honest admission of treasonous Kazani Tartars of Die Indianische-Pfadfinders and Hiwis (that Russians rode with them he ignored), and yet a solid affirmation of their cause's righteous need. Reb Yitzhak, son of Sharon el-Rider agreed. "Any chance to extract justice, El-Shaddai's Justice, on Babylon, or as we say too, Rome we welcome." This was deliberately provocative- a Jew slandering so many Saints and Holy Caesars on crucifixion's very day- he was almost too tired to stop righteous anger rising in his heart, but a strange feeling of calm, shade of a solar eclipse, chilled his blood, and in his heart appeared several words: "There is a Great Task". Reb Yakov nodded in agreement, perhaps hesitant to speak before what he might have seen as a more assured and genuine authority of Reb Yitzhak.

Then Yitzhak continued, and what he said put Yakov to shame, like he was twenty once more in Seminary, and being lectured by Griegory over some basic logical fallacy over a doctrine. "All well and good, all fine and proper. But what will it be like?" I's simplicity brought an awkwardly sudden halt to everyone's casual group movement. "Please, elaborate, *comrade*." "When Moses marched into Sinai, he moved heaven and earth; and still he had to speak to a council of elders. You who do not speak for *our* Lord, who will you seek council and aid from?" Yakov's gut sank. This was why he was here- not a personal moral battle. More polemic. He let hateful bile, rage at each old man who sent him here for his sinful pride and surety. Of course it was he who would bulldog in this negotiation. Rage boiling hot, not merely simmering in his back's depths, interjected. "Yes. Where, *Communists*, will you offer us positions of judges? Will you insist on your commissars interrogating and proselytizing heresy amongst sheep of our Flock?" Venom dripped with each word, venom against Alim who had seen this before him- at himself for not having seen it- at his superiors for their baleful task.

Boris, Isus's brother did rise. "We Pomorskoye believe that LORD favors us and will not let fake devilry and invention of Adversary damage Us True Faithful. We do not

want to stand besides Antichrist” he gestured towards Yakov, still in his gilt robe, “nor do we wish to provoke Babylon to wrath before LORD wills it.”

“Still,” he conceded, ruralite’s accent thickening with repressed anticipation, “there are signs. Angel’s lights dance in our heavens. Hell-mouths swallow farms along Taiga rivers. Calves are born with two heads in southlands. His appointed time may indeed be at hand. We will pray and we will dance for success; we will tell our brothers faithful in lands West, that their time comes; and if LORD favors it he will bring righteous dead back, rising souls to our pious worship, our comforts and our families at his altar; and they shall stand with you to strike Babylon. It will be so in time as He wills it. We too want to know what pound of flesh you Red butchers demand for your Moloch and Sickle.” Crowded pagans behind their leaders chuckled at this, but many other faces turned into grim lines of serious concern. Too much grandstanding might make tensions boil- Yakov could not hardly stand by for long, no matter how calm he made his face, stand by and take blasphemous slander; and each cutting insult and non-promise could not but offend every group here.

Perhaps a lesser host would have shattered then and there. Perhaps a group of wise men - some arrogant, some humble - might have broken, some to fast, others to feast, and reconvened after Jewish Sabbath’s sunset to nail shut a coffin of hope, splintering one final time into an eternal night of roaring eastern fires and steel wings of death from western fields. But Maria Plamya rose to her reputation, and in daylight’s dying moments, stood framed by purple spines of mountains and a red-gold halo of sun. Over smoke and flickering embers she drew herself straight and stern as an arrow or long gun to speak.

Pomorskie, you are farmers and trappers. You are people of plows, not swords. In this hour of spring you are needed to sow. We ought all agree that if you offer us freely food to eat and fur to warm us in winter drafts, that it would be a good act of charity in a cause which is just in standing for christian brotherhood? You must see for yourselves, even if we do not, that a slave who dies before Your Word reaches them is lost? Well, we will free those slaves to live long yet, and so your words may yet reach souls yet untouched. That your families will no longer be torn apart by their slave raids or bombers. And we would be grateful, if you farmers who you are, would send men who, like Aaron, can speak your words to your waiting faithful, as no doubt *us* others here (she gestured around, and did she linger on Father Yakov, perhaps causing a blush hidden by dusky light?) will do. And you are right and correct. Like Exodus, your Decalogue will be compact, covenant, and constitution, Between every group we will accept a delegation at a spokestable, for airing grievances and questions- but we expect obligations sworn for compact to be honored, holding you by your own Gods. Moreover, Party Members will distribute fairly, according to skill and number, at dispositions of spokesmen’s will’s myriad arms- missiles, grenades, rifles, bullets, killing tools of all kinds- supplied at Tashkent’s leisure by Friends from abroad.

At this, each camp nodded. Support, guns and explosives from abroad (maybe British, maybe Yankee, maybe Nippon), spoke louder than any fiery speech. A delayed mention

had sealed their signatures, for who would refuse to arm their people in righteous self-defense?

Pomorskoies spoke first: "It would be admissible, even right. Yet, we will determine what is just in food we bring; have faith in us to be reasonable with what we can bring, and set not quotas, and we will have faith in your acts." At this Maria nodded. Then, to Yakov's relief, his vision blurred and choked by smoke, she said "I say that we break for night's rest, and reconvene tomorrow, unless there are any questions." Izbulat and Slava looked at each other, then Slava said with foreboding "We will speak our piece tomorrow, when Christ is in hell. Farewell." and as one a fur coated mass of pagans retired to their forest encampment.

Behind his smoke poisoned tears, blindly led on by Avraam, his soul smoldered with mixed passion and fearful guilt, centering around one point. Why would a Communist promise to protect- no, abjectly ask, for missionaries? Was that not antithetical to firm Communist doctrine on God's lack and man's triumphant Reason? Or was she fool enough to sincerely believe that godlessness would triumph over holy church authority in fertile convert souls of toiling slaves? Then, there were those pagans who hated all love and fit so swell into pockets of Adversaries financiers; pigheaded atheistic Pomorskoye behind their fanciful denunciations; conniving Mahmud Alim who doubtless saw this peak as his and his unholy brethren's rightful land; cloying words of Jews and their slavish fools they had led astray... his thoughts were becoming uncharitable if righteous, uncalled for in present moments, so he retreated into prayer while stumbling towards humble beds prepared by Monks of Mount Iremel.

Dawn bells rang red, calling him towards service, away from sleep's comfort. Ignoring complaints of his legs and mind, he pushed through old age's fatigue for First Hour, first of Hours. No longer did Great Friday's wailing sorrow hold. Religious grief fell into weary routine as quickly as services did for children felled by mines or coughs. Congregant faces seemed more tired, older, Christ's absence sinking over hills and valleys. It was hard not to wonder if venerated Icons were also bound through time to Christ's body. Was His will weaker at this moment, witnessed in Descent-Into-Hell's Icon? Surely not. And yet- perhaps it was that up here in mountain's chill, his old bones simply could not feel spring's resurrection.

Here on high he was far from his young days on Judas tree lined Lenin-prospekt, in thin air. Safe, high above childhood's beatings and sorrows- but also memories of friends and young passions, high and removed from his life's heart. Holy, yet wholly alien, strange lights in night's vast expanse up on this northern peak. Nagging memories of life below, worldly life, haunted his recitations, haunted his thoughts of his purpose meeting here.

He allowed himself rest between each service, thankful for little interruptions, savoring moments seated on his ornate seat. At each Hour's service, his eyes noticed Christ's golden face, shining amidst sepulchral darkness, stepping down from his cross into Hades for their sins. As Icons tugged at his gaze, bleak hope tugged at his heart: Could Russia yet be redeemed? Could his homeland still be lifted up out from under this cruelest of yokes, out of bondage and butchery and banditry? Evening came, heralded by a chorus of nine bell strikes which fading across Iremel's valley, thick with trees and little shepherds. An hour of light still remained. Did it reach abyssal depths over 2000 years, gracing Christ's harrowing journey?

He took Avraam, had him carry his black cassock-tail, resting step by step his old body and sagging bones, his cold bloodless feet and weary head on his cross staff's intricate silver, lamp's iron handle biting into his left hand. "Patience, Courage, Strength" he murmured to himself. Lord, a mighty lion was his shepherd, was all of Russia's shepherd and surely would protect them.

Fanir Izbulat, face shadowy and stained red with ochre, deepend in dying light hummed, lost in heathen trance. Muslims were stoking their fires preparing to break their fast- perhaps shared with Reb's with a wink and a nod, although of course observant Jewish men were still within their own enclosure. Only a half hour of light now remained as he warmed himself against fireside warmth, smoke dispersing out into open mountain air. Somehow Communards at their workhouse had raised a contraption of metal poles which they were using to broadcast radio. Yakov felt fear, like a sheep, and he prayed to his Lion for protection. Signals were dangerous, dangerous, inviting strikes and prying eyes from space. Further East one could move openly, but here to even walk undisguised invited attention from Adversaries eyes which swung as clockwork through starlit skies. What courage, what strength they had to bring something so modern and flagrant to this edge of livable space!

Spilling from workhouse doors, communards came, cloistering a pale thin man, tall for a man on this side of civilization, but only middling for hearty giants found in northern hunting and mining regions where trade with plantations of Adversary was easy. Salt and pepper, streaks of silver in his long black beard, then under his dirty tan saddle robe and faded midnight leather overcoat, streaks of silver and gold in ornament on a dark background, like priestly clothes of a priest, those of weight and authority. At his hip a black leather holster held a barrel of dark steel, like from some triumphant guerrilla or evil Nazi at a Novosibirsk kinoteka event. He was accompanied by Marat and Maria, and seemed somewhat shaky on his legs. From his introduction, as "Jo" it was clear that either his grasp on Russian was shaky or he had some impediment. Maria began, but was interrupted before she could finish saying "brother" by Fanir Izbulat and Slava who interrupted in rehearsed and eery unison. "What would you offer to us miners and hillfolk, Mistress Maria? Can you offer us food, fuel, or fucking what we can buy off Germans with our copper and gems? Will you build us bawdy houses or sell us slaves so that we might stay bailiffs of mines and avoid breaking our own backs doing work fit for moles, not men?" She stared at them, taken aback at so blatant a demand, pausing to respond.

I can promise you that if we force yokes from our backs and push Adversary back, if we keep our hills and hunting grounds open and free of hateful gasses, if we spend sweat and blood now, those things you build in mines will echo there for eternity. If we don't, all Gods will abandon you and chlorine will flood depths of your mines and you will do no more than polish silver for some German's burial horde. Damn your eyes if you turn away from requests made of you as rightful mistress of these high hills

and she seemed to spit out her last words as if they were bitter poison or hot anathema in her throat. Behind their furs, pagan men looked with grimaces of curious patronism. "We will think on this, but your words carry strong force" they claimed with barely concealed disdain.

Now it was time to introduce this "Jo" ; his purpose seemed plain, a hired gun, maybe a tactical advisor. But as it came to be, there was a thicker plot. He was some

kind of officer, maybe with technical knowledge, and then, ah what had that silly girl been thinking, he was a German, and why in God's name had she brought one of them to a hidden mountain passage? If ever a German found itself far behind its cisUralic fastness, they were in a pitch-drunk lycher's posse, "huntin' bandits" on a dozen hateful race vendettas, a thousand miles away from anywhere they might have called home. Though they usually wound up shot inside of an hour of finding a village plaza, sometimes followed by armored cavalry's hatful chopper buzz. Father Yakov, of course, had heard heart-and-stomach wrenching confessions of bandits and raiders; and he condemned all violence, even against broken man-breakers. But it was beyond belief to treat a German as anything besides a foul beast (save those pious who were beneficent contacts of His Church)... and so what in Christ's good name was one doing, here, on Holy Saturday? It was offensive and beyond idiotic, and no ramblings about official ranks or missiles or "proletarians and sympathizers in Der Kriegsmarine" as if any German of any stripe would lay down a single bread loaf, let alone their life for a Russian brother- let alone to simply let their brother live in peace, instead of taking to exploit, beat, and enslave him.

Their word was as good as shit from a bear in Rome. He thought about Saint Basil's shattered domes, surviving only in grainy gray photographs of his Grandfathers' time in Moscow's Kremlin, when it had yet stood. He thought too of ten thousand tents with family's, starving slowly, burning under a hail of mute and evil bombs across Siberia's holy bosom. Now, it was washed away in a deluge, at a lake bottom bottom blasphemous oh made by man. Perhaps, as Subbotniki often said, Germans were a manifestation of God's wrath, a tool to cleanse impiety. Perhaps they were not conscious of what they did then, if in any case they were His tools. What did that make this one in front of him? Could it even think for itself?

Slava, wild and heathen, spoke up, spitting a big glob of phlegm in front of blazing woodsmoke, where men painted in twilight color prepared to break variegated fasts. "Out on Front-Range's edges and along this mountain spine we hire 'em. Men are men, and for a bit of whiskey or gold, they'll dance how you want. It's no problem for us. Hell, most of 'em are old eagle soldiers, looking to get away from their lives, and pretty handy with a gun. Without 'em we might not be able to hold off 'em Kazan tatars. No offense to your boys" he added to Mahmud Alim. This was not a strong talking point for this man, or for Maria's gambit. But then Reb Yitzhak spoke up; "I would see every German from here to France swinging high from trees. If God is looking for ideas, I'd say 'Sodom'. But, Germans outnumber stars in a winter's sky. Frankly, we're fucked, more year by year. If he's out here on this freezing mountain, now, in these latter days, he's either fucked or crazy, and either way- we can use him. I'd say keep him chained though, or tied in a saddle." Too frank and too fair- it was unbelievable that a Jew could be so tolerant, why- how- fuck, could *they* not condemn him! A Nazi officer decked out in Gold Eagles! They ought to hang him from a Judas tree! Isus stared at man, looking over tongues of flame for a long effect.

"A man like that must know what lies in his Great Leader's heart. Perhaps he can broker a treaty. At least he might show us how to trick Adversaries troops. If he repents and let us baptize him as a brother according to Russian way, and as God will allow no lie in his name, I will raise no objection." Isus had a particular accent from preaching in a farm church across Yenisei River, thick and swampy, and Maria had to translate into Ural Yiddish for Jo to get a picture. He agreed, rapidly and enthusiastically, breaking a big grin out. This, of course, only raised Yakov's reticence

and suspicion. Still, he could hardly refuse, alone among all others after being in such agreement only yesterday. He barely managed to say "I must meditate on this during Resurrection's services" before slinking off more in a lizard's unglory than a strong lion's dignity.

Returning in deepening spring night, he sent Avraam ahead bearing light, walking through pre-moon darkness. He was left alone with queer thoughts crowding his head. Everyone knew what Germans were. Of course, you could get to know them, even make friends with some of them- but they'd devour you like lions after a sheep at dusk's first red. Eden, that walled Garden paradise, was closed to man, and our old ways are gone, never to return.

As he was carefully navigating along another faint gray river of loose stone, edging steep banks of dark shadow, he heard a distant wolf howl. Relief from weakening solitude appears when a man, Subbotniki Reb Yakov approached. "I see, Father, some great discomfort at our Adversaries presence" and Yakov could only nod in his evidently bitter silence. "Well Father, I feel similar. You know, most Subbotnikim are old blood- 200 years of good practice. Me, I guess my mother was one, or at least that's what I say, but being born in a slave-pen and ripped from Mother's teat isn't good for memories of that. No circumcision, no rites, hell not even your fool's baptism in those concrete huts. But a real Moses type, Yuri Ivanovich, led a riot years ago, hell decades back, when I was younger than your boy is now. Maybe it was even his first one, before he wound up at a mine, and every overseer and gunslinging frontsoldaten went chasing this way and that after his scrawny ass. Anyway, a riot like that left little old me time to sneak under 'lectric fences with a couple of friends and an old closet Jewess for a man, and well, I figure add fifteen years and some good scalping action, and that's why my bands sent me and not someone a decade older and better versed. Doesn't fully make sense- but I got a nose for nonsense, so maybe then again it does. And with this German, I smell plenty." Father Yakov was getting muddled. "Son, is there a point you have in here?" "Well, old *pater*, I guess it's this- we've got rope here, maybe we ought to see Lord's will done here. But Reds are proud Reds, and they'll not let a yid's yid who hasn't heard nothing but stories of Huns decide." "Are you *not* a 'Yid's yid' boy?" Yakov had to ask, old theological discussion's spirit and a desire to rib a yearling rising. "Fuck you, Popov, I'm a yid through and through, only I don't look down on those less fortunate, see?" And, for a moment with only starlight to guide him, Yakov did, and then any insight flickered out.

"Son, I'm an old man, and tired. And my monks, well, son they might be fit to dig a ditch and die in it, but they've no interest in a hanging" He hoped that was true. His grandfather had put plenty in ditches, too many to want more. And western invaders had done that again five or fifty times over. "And anyhow, maybe it's not so different than working with a yid". A harsh comment, which he had thought he meant in a spirit of contemplation, but immediately resulted in justified reaction. He doubled over, catching blood pouring from his nose, and then felt a second sharp crack and pain in his side. "Fuck you, Priest. You fucking Roman Cross-Lovers were almost as bad as Germans a hundred years ago, and if they hadn't turned into fucking demons that would still be true, fucking gentile philistines." Another crack.

Yakov moaned, cries drifting into abyssal and empty space, blood filling, sticky against his lips. Hours of crawling over shattered chest bones made distant that Dormitoria, but somewhere, somehow, in his pain and bleeding sinful guilt faithful Avraam came to save him, left, returning with fetched novitiates to carry him back. In

his dreams that night a pack of wolves whispered through long grass, moving like snakes towards an old, wooden and ramshackle Novosibirsk school he had grown to be first as violent a man as his father and grandfather, then as painfully passive a Christian as his dead mother. At his end, a roaring lion with flaming scarlet mane scattered them before him, turning skylines and sending Suns and old haunting ghosts highâne away, and every stalking wolf was transfigured into bleating lambs.

He woke up late, feeling sick and sore, old body rusting away, bones tired and weak, and somewhere down he felt that his time was nearly at an end, a day and an hour who were ready to be known. It wasn't until three bronzey bells rang that he realized it was Easter Sunday, Resurrection Day, and he was missing his service for a first time in five decades. He rose half way, and collapsed, coughing blood. Avraam rushed in from just outside, and breathlessly sobbed, mopping up crimson spatter. "Father, Father, you must rest, you must. Father Toma is doing a service, since you are in need of rest. I found you beaten Father. Father you must tell us, who did this." Rapid questions but all Yakov wanted to do was hug him and tell him to save his soul by attending a sacred mass, leave this old Samaritan caked in sin to die. Yakov could only laugh inside for a second before he felt pain tearing at his lungs. "Ah, I suppose Toma will be well pleased to take his parish back on such a holy day." Words whistling through broken teeth like wind through haunted buildings of Magnitogorsk. He tousled Avraam's dirty straw hair, thick and tawny on such a young head. "Avraam, Avraam, orphan child and dearest son. I did this to myself." There was only one way forward. Do not think, act only with passion, a God dream's heat, a lion's flame- he must go now, before even seeing Icons of Resurrection, he had to perform his sacred duty. His Lord had spoken with a lion's strong roar. He realized he could not rise. "Child, fetch Maria Plamya and council. I must speak to them all here. But, first, fetch my seal and paper."

When a motley crew of holy figures had entered, Reb Yakov looking downcast, face hidden in stony shadow, and a near panic when he saw Yakov's broken age, Yakov's letter was signed and sealed. "Lord has commanded and His Church will obey. Maria Plamya is our Sacred Nation's figurehead and our holy Church's banner. I will say this with my seal, for my brothers and sons in faith. I will forget beasts among your troupes and hold faith in our Lord as he will in you. Let Our Holy Land be resurrected from hellfires of this modern German machine. God forgive us all."

Before they could respond, he asked Avraam to see that Father Toma be given his letter to return to Novosibirsk; and that he be permitted to gaze upon Icons of Resurrection. "Look skyward for Signs, for strange lights" he almost whispered to Avraam, thinking of Pomorskoye heresy with a curiosity towards his future born of fading life. He searched Christ's painted face for certainty, a man who had gone beyond, traveled through hell, gone into Godhood and lived again. As warm Monday sun melted some little last snow on Lesser Iremel's peak, and Happy Week began, Yakov Bissarianovich was dead, groups dispersing to bring tribute and muscle frontierwards for a Great Ride. Avraam would be sent with a copied letter to Nevsky Cathedral in Novosibirsk, to all ecclesiastices, and Iremel's monastery would return to quiet summer days, buzzing of bees interrupted only occasionally by tolling bells of Ural bronze, standing high above deep and cold ground which they had been pulled from. This was his will, and his final act of passion. God willing, no flames would reach their heights and return them to slag from which they had been drawn.

16: Chariots of the Demon, Legion



A dream of shining aluminum skin floated above him, a massive bubble of foil hoisting him upward and upward so long as he didn't look back at it. It had started staring at the rotting face of Lindemann in the canal, covered in muck and blood. Then he had felt a tug behind him and began to rise, first above the edges of the bank, concrete squares and the tarmac streets, the squat apartments of pine and brick, towers of steel and bureaucracies enthroned in concrete. Up he had drifted above the great green parks of the southern banks, the bustle of the docks and slaughterhouses, and then up further still. He had sorn past the top floors of the great marble and glass buildings, shining chrome towers, penthouse terraces, until the whole city had lain before him like a great ant hive, from the sprawling outer stretches of low houses and half-functioning farms to the bustling vertical center of gravity. And then he floated up further still, past the city. On the far left, a huge drove of cattle were marching out of the Donn plain, from their grazing across the steppe towards the red slaughterhouses. Below, huge ships of freight spanned the length of the Caspian, while to the North the great blue tract of the Wolga was matched by great tracks of lumber, stone, and steel. Finally, pouring across the bridges and away from the slums of The City were a million dark ant tracks, and as the balloon kept rising he could see them, prairie schooners, tractors, mobile homes, spewing forth from The City towards the frontier. From further east yet, he thought he could almost make out in the twilight of the sun, only distantly illuminating the crescent beyond the rich dark green wood of the mountains a wave of ants erupting from the ground itself, from all four corners of the wilderness partition, moving back in a counter-charge to push the swarm back.

The great foil counter-weight kept tugging at him, slipping him from the bonds of Earth though he did not dare look at it. Up here, yet further up, he felt a different kind of frontier, pushing the boundaries of lightness and weightlessness as he was pulled back, ever further seeing the blue pearl with white swirls and green splotches across its face. A sensation of tranquility and peace, the kind that can only come from distance passed through him. He felt the bounds of his consciousness slipping, freeing themselves from his control, and then he looked over his shoulders into a blinding glow of white sun reflected from the huge foil moon, and he felt himself tumble down, down, down, back towards the rotten muck where Lindemann floated.

Ivan Olegaevich Honcaherenko stared out across blooming spring flowers, a field dressed in vibrant hues of purple and gold, flowing green grasses, red-brown shrubs, all under a sky streaked azure blue and marbled white with clouds. All around him he could hear grasshoppers rubbing legs, buzzing bees awakened from winter for their restorative feast, chattering prairie birds, shrill and piercing melodies of calendra larks from bare mounds of dirt, gallop whistle *twee-t-t-twee-t-t-twee-t-twee* of stone-curlews, harsh *haw-haws* of some roller bird dressed sky blue, and cacophonies of quail and lark, chirping shrikes, even groans of a big bustard mother found misplaced at dawn. Beyond it all he heard horses whinny and neigh, hordes of them now waking and feeding back in winding stone and scrub canyons and hills behind him, light in sandstone and shadow of sunrise. It was a fine place, and a fine morning to wake up, in full spring prairie bloom. He beat off his bedroll to make sure it was dry from any morning dew, and then seized and fired his orange handgun towards vast skybound vistas. He had woken up stiff this morning, like every trail morning, and stiff trigger pulls only made him spring closer to launch. It would be a good day, he could feel that.

Sounds of bustards and hedgehogs, heavy breathing and moaning calls had kept him awake late, gazing at stars, but he was risen up, sun-like, pumped up and ready to go in warm spring air. No more frigid Siberian gusts that made him cough his

lungs out, no Commissar, not at all. It was fresh and living, and nature was falling in love with itself again. He thought even *if* his flare *had* burst green onto some egghead Hun's black magnetron screen, he had plenty of time, so from his sack, he rummaged out aluminum tubes and his bottle of oils and dyes. On a wooden frame of his rain cover, fly already rolled up and stashed, was perfect to clip canvas, looking out at magnificent oceans of flat grass and starbursts of sexual color from alfalfa bouquets' purple blush, indeed from a hundred flowering plants and preening birds. If only he could enchant dull canvas with their songs and motions, if only he could somehow show that vibrant life in a world of static colors and oil!

He had gotten a good start capturing rippling grasses in still brushstrokes, movement implied by their frozen shape, when he decided that it was time again. He pulled again his orange gun from his woolen vest pocket, loaded in another flare shell and pointed it high. Far up, thousands of feet high, Toyota's High Velocity cartridge would explode into a big foil parachute and hang there, being very reflective. It was a strange thing, and hopefully someone out there would be curious about, if not one, than a synchronicity of radar-blooms. He broke out blue and white oil and tried to capture skies like he saw, sparkling gold from sun and streaked with arterial clouds. It was only a quarter of oil sky later that distant thrums of blades sounded out like thundering hooves. He paused, wondering if his oil sky was dry enough to roll up, and if he trusted leaving it here. He decided against that, and so gambled, rolling it so that raw canvas formed an innermost curl, and then he slid it back into its aluminum womb. Wooden frames came down quickly, and he was off, pack jostling on his shoulders as he jogged into dry orchards, canyons behind him. Grass abruptly ended at stern, eroding rock faces and twisting dry passages as he climbed up and over exposed grimaces of stone, moving with rocky dry scrub towards a passageway's end. Ducking into a little stone rill, he took time to turn around. Hand flat out from his brow against midmorning sun, he scanned horizons, looking out across flat prairie and high hills. At great distance a black insect was buzzing, bulging faceted eyes gazing from matte titanium cheekbones at natural beauty, huge blades of shining steel cutting and churning once serene air currents which had tousled Igor's hair. It was moving fast and getting louder. He paused, loaded another shell, and fired. Best keep it hungry and hunting.

Bait laid, he turned back into sandy stone walls of carved canyons. He was sliding around a big vertical nose when a thorn brush tore at his arm and brought bright red droplets pressuring through flax shirt sleeves. He could feel himself pressing hard against his sheepskin pants at such salty roses, and had to remind himself of worse gore following such gunships, like ruined fields after a plague of locusts. He had to keep moving, no time to savor moments. His heart was hard and firm, pumping him forward as he stumbled in leather boot wraps over dry riverbed, and fell flat against one stone wall. Bladesound chopping fresh air was loud now, thundering and echoing across stone. Chattering birds and humming insects, and scurrying little mammals and lizards had vanished before a herald of a thousand terrible things coming towards him. He could still hear and feel his chest pounding, and so he got back up, scrambling on little footholds and then starting to scale rock, grasping at cracks and gaps in ancient fixtures for any perch. He could hear choppers off to his left. They had probably found quarry, bronzed leather tents amidst verdant grass. He heard a couple shouts and then galloping steel shod hooves over hard stones down wide canyon sides. He had to hurry. He hit a clifftop, rolled down into a half-gully on his left and took off running. His feet stumbled and tried unsuccessfully

to betray him time and again. Scrub-thorns tried their damndest to puncture sheep hide tied at his thighs, and his face felt as red as a beet with hot blood as he sprinted and stumbled across unforgiving terrain, stumbling and only just managing to stay upright as he rounded a gully turn like a runner at Berlin Olympiads.

His young heart thundering like war-machine turbines just out of sight, he made it to cool shade, a little rock outcrop where Marta and Little Ilya were waiting. He had one of his ceramic pitchers of water set aside there, and he drained half of it before splashing half again over his face, quietly, as Matra and Ilyushka kept well concealed behind thick scrub. One chopper was snaking its way through expansive canyon walls towards collected heaps of polished corrugated steel plates that formed a strange mound against a dead end. Bursts of gunfire, huge cannon rounds, loud even against roaring motor fans sounded out and steel shrapnel exploded out, flashes of deadly splinters of metal flying harmlessly against thick canyon rock, as old as Mother Earth. Across from their little enclosure, across a deep crevasse in eternal rock that opened into some forever dark network of caves, inhabited only by bats, Big Ilya stood up. He had a gray beard and a huge cape of green across his shoulders, with brush cut and tied into fabric, making him hard for even a keen eye to spot against untrammelled land. One hand, held easily, like a toy, an ancient rifle. He hollered out, aimed at a bug-eye of glass and fired a single heavy slug at beady black glass. A sure *thwack* was drowned under mechanical grinding. Nothing happened, of course. Barely an imprint in hard material, but spiteful it swung towards an old shepherd and moved across cave-pits, above rocky outcrops, towards where Big Ilya had been just a moment before, guns ripping out scrub from earth, pulverizing red rock into flashes of ochre dust. It was impossible to tell if Big Ilya had been hit in such red haze. Of course, he had assured all of them that, since they had changed their sabbath, they would be immune to hellfire of demonic weapons but... even hard hearts clenched facing a twenty millimeter shell. Suddenly a flash of verdant green further down a canyon feeder, back into foothills where Earth's walls began to narrow. Just like folds of a clay pot on a wheel, it took experience to know how rock paths bent and collapsed space, experience that machine-bound men could not have. Below, Arkady and his horse Zelenyy dashed around a bending wall. Now safely rearwards of any guns, a bush left standing by storming bullets rose to a crouch and waved an arm. At this, Little Ilya rose, cheered once and aimed an aluminum tube of his own rocket towards Satan's beast and fired.

This was a disaster. What odds of a mortal strike from here were few, fewer still given their cheap Toyota Tashkent weapons, and their people's luck in general. It exploded harmlessly against sandstone boulders. Its turbines seemed to halt for a second and then kept moving forward. It wouldn't be long now before it turned around to investigate and kill, and then it would be back over their cave system... Igor grabbed another rocket and fed it into Little Ilya's tube. "Again" he urged, voice in a tense whisper, shaking. He had no desire to draw Satan's thing back towards them, but their die was cast, and they couldn't unroll it. It was this, or run like a coward, like his damned father. Marta picked up her launcher tube and fired, and then he reloaded hers. They didn't have eight shots between them, but they had to go now, when big fixed cannons were facing away from them, before their bodies were found, crushed, ground into tiny pieces, blown into oblivion. Rockets two and three went out, one spiraling downwards, one off above wall-rims and onto a dry peak. Four and five fared no better. Six got close, and then cut out and simply dropped down fifty feet from it- malfunction. His heart was in his throat one moment and his ass next. Rocket

seven erupted from Marta's barrel, flying straight and true, dipping down then up then back to level, a little spiral.

And then *bam*, just a hit on a rotor blade, one in a million maybe, and a huge shaft of steel flew off, a broken sword clattering into cave pits. There was no trail of black smoke, no fiery descent, instead its flight path sheared like a blade, and it tumbled over and over into a rockwall, whole top rotor fan snapping off, and tearing body and head into hard stone, leaving a sparking smear of torn, blackened rock. Men rushed out of crevasses, holding captured sub-machine guns, swarming like ants towards a great dark corpse.

Around their canyon cul-de-sac, over high rocks and caves, down rope ladders that led bottomward, they went. Red Ivan Poroshenko was leaning over a black clad body that had been pulled from smoldering wreckage, and worked at something with his big broad knife. When Igor got closer, he saw gloves peeled back, a knife pushing into where a ring finger had been. Other fingers were already gone, replaced with bloody absence. Other people were grouped amidst wreckage, trying to pry off panels and chunks of metal for precious electronics and explosives. When they noticed three youths joining them, a cheer went up. "You brought it down!" "Huzzah for youths!" "Strong aim!" and they stood, three strong together, grins and blushes covering pale sweat tracks. Little Ilya and Marta close enough that they were touching, Igor in front of them where he figured he could be. Once humanities acclaiming cacophony had died down, people turned back to what they had been doing before. Igor went to take a closer look at what Red Ivan was doing. He had moved on to another hand and was assembling fingers on his dead Nazi's chest. Then he saw that off to Ivan's side, a collection of finger bones was piled high around steel wire. Red Ivan grunted. "Fuckin' demons. This one couldn't keep his fingers to himself. He's one what's been taking trophies from our dead's hands. Maybe their groins too- but I'll wait till I'm sure of that to bother messing with a hun's pickled cucumber." A deft blade stroke fell through two remaining left hand fingers. "Now we've got to make sure their next group sees 'im so it's proper educational. Don't want it to go to waste." "What will you do with fingers?" Igor asked, but Red Ivan was already stuffing them into that same dead man's mouth. "I think they'll get this message. As for his comrades- well I can't figure if they should get burned or buried, but I'm partial to leaving them for dogs. Might be someone we used to know saw them last." Igor didn't doubt that. Two winters ago Big Clay town had gotten burned to charred foundations, and such devils had left messages which Big Ilya had read to them "Slaves leave for Siberian Reserve. No Slavs or Dogs on Free Soil", and in embers they had found many fragments- but few whole bodies.

He had smashed his beakers last night, rough geometric lines of char in red clay splintering into formless patterns. They had waited until it was dark to begin moving, and then spread quickly out across flowering prairies and rills. It was a long day and only getting longer- exhaustion had set in by evening, yesterday's excitement of bringing down a chopper had prevented all but an hour or two of rest before night came on and they had had to move towards Voerwartsfliegerhorst Apachin. Igor's mother had grown up in Trans-Don Ukraine on a vine plantation, and she knew all about Apachins, ferocious beast-men that had been civilized by American Jews. Whether Ukrainians or Germans were more like Apachin, Igor could never stick too. When they were raiding Germans, it was true, they hollered and hooted like bears, but

Germans were inhumanely ferocious and more like animals than men, how they cut corpses for art instead of painting. Then again, they all wore strange fine fabrics, and Ukranians wore animal pelts. In these early dawn hours, waiting for German morning Bugles to sound (a call to prayer for their devil-god, like some muslim Mongol Horde a half-millennia ago, Red Ivan said, a comparison that spiraled away from stories of savage Apachin and slaver Yankees that already gave Igor too many headaches) he found himself fading in and out of a dreamy fog. Fumes from Tashkenti pitch that they layered across young grass only made it stranger, ancient carbon particles of a hundred antediluvian tree-rings filling his lungs and his mind with unsteady motions and strange, undulating serpents.

Big Ilya had insisted that Mountain-Mother (some whispered “Malachite Mistress!”- others “Boney Legs!”) had ascertained a red dawn promised a sudden storm. It was more than just an idle omen. If winds weren’t hellishly strong, fire wouldn’t cover their advance, and killing machines would be able to take off. He lay, pressed into a hollow of hard dry earth and green spring grass, gas soaked grass meters in front filling his nose, waiting for wind to whip up. They couldn’t control Nature with spells or omens, and although he thought words from some hills-witch were worth nothing at all, Big Ilya had been right that none of them had been hurt by bullets yesterday. Maybe he’d be right again. Marta and Little Illya lay, cuddled together off to his left, their noises mixing with buzzes of hedgehog breathing, bird chatter, and insect sounds that filled verdant grassland. Above, faint morning stars were fading away, and a hue of blood crimson splashed itself back across Eastern highland promenades, purpling violet hills against dawn sun. Hail!

As orange-gold’s first glimmer peaked above distant red-pink rocks, loud and fast blows of a bronze bugle sounded in westwards distance, and he felt hair on his neck rising, waiting to be blown flat by a divine gust headed west, out of canyon channels and towards Satan’s base on flat prairie. For a second, for a minute, for several, he felt nothing, not even a gentle murmur, just dry stillness in a pre-dawn grassland sky readying for oven baked day’s coming heat. Then, a whisper cresting to a shout, crescendoing to a roar! A coil unwound itself in his stomach. He crouched up, looking towards a distant southern hillock where Big Ilya would be waiting. Static electricity, a sudden darkness blacking out sunlight- miracle of all miracles a storm wind approached, and a glinting flash of light, distant mirror signals! He struck his flint and steel, lit his rag torch, and tossed it towards oil painted lines on grass. For a thousand meters, fifty or more similar burning rags flung themselves forward into a self-immolation. Suddenly sheets of white and gold fame jetted up out of green prairie, a windscreen of thick black smoke, greasy and rich following, and then wind began to propel them forward. Automatic thermal guns would be lost; their electronic eyes turned red and filled with tears from fumes; their concrete bunkers turned into little furnaces fit to roast devils. In front of blazing walls, little animal wails and gushing flutters of birds started, pulling at Igor’s heart. Rushing waves of bustards and quail streamed in front of his wavering red banner of flame. Behind lines of fire, his band was creeping forward flat on chard ground, thick sheepskin keeping them sweaty but safe from embers. Charred bodies of rabbits and other little creatures amongst charred scrub showed that other things could not say likewise. That had nothing to do with sweat and lingering smoke and burning embers which beaded painful tears in his eyes, of course. He was a strong soldier, a fighter, a wild apache bringing retribution, retribution a hundred-fold on slaving murdering beasts ahead. Three hundred yards ahead, several picket gun posts at Apachin, confused by such a massive wall of flames

were now expending what ammunition they hadn't shot at empty fire where at a host of birds which flew past their hateful emplacements. He could hear zipper-sounds of machine gun bolts sliding back and forth and painfully awkward screams of dying birds, cut to ribbons from fleeing flocks. No longer were there distinct or distinguishable sounds, only waves of anguish and fear and pain, screaming across vast endless skies of storm clouds. Had their eggs already been cooked by their blaze before their breasts were torn by ripping guns? He never even felt apprehension approaching where turrets had been, their blasts falling silent while he, a dozen meters behind wide sheets of advancing fire, was still safely distant.

Already they were coming up on charred concrete blockhouses. Blooms of scorch marks rose, black against stone gray. Odds were that any demons would see this blaze as a freak natural occurrence. Why send out men to cook in bunkers on a force of nature? Of course, if there were men in bunkers, waiting to open fire on any unsuspecting bandits taking advantage... Their biggest hope was that Germans still saw them as savages, capable of nothing more than mud huts and clay pots. New rockets, a missing helicopter, interruption of routine bombing in recent years- what could that tell them of this whole idea of having run to hills, eking out a living of hunting and gathering like in ancient days, safe from strikes and summer fires. These were things his people had to rely on. Not only those things of course. They would never have dared approach thermal guns without a brewing dawn storm at their backs, gale force winds whipping grass and flames into a frenzy. Nor would they have dared without packets of dynamite and High Explosive blasting caps that he was at this instant tossing into an empty bunker. Blow them high.

Blasts of concrete alerted Germans that their flanks were tenderly exposed. Could they feel Igor's hand, heavy with sticks of nitroglycerin, creeping into their tender areas? Suddenly loud bursts of fire, short but ferocious, sounded out and Igor tossed himself flat against charred Earth. Hot remains of grass burned his cheek, but in concrete faces behind him, pockmarks had appeared. He looked over at Little Ilya, expecting horrors, bullets that had broken through youthful loving bodies, twisted and merged flesh, blood and more blood spilling into hot land. Instead they were quite alive, not even entwined, flat against embers, a bundle of nitroglycerin in her hand, and an old rifle in his. Igor tried not to think. Blow them high. Blow them high.

Another series of chattering bursts from behind curtains of fire sounded, and more splinters of concrete flew off of a wrecked blockhouse behind him. It sounded like shots were coming from head-level, which was to say ground level as he was still flat on his stomach and face. He was stuck unless he could take out that gun, and sooner, not later a hateful round would get lucky. His hands shook peeling apart sticks of nitroglycerin and cord fibers. Likely Satan was in a trench, behind a ditch to stop running horses and wild animals, and fire too. *Krfrum-krfrum-krfrum-krfrkrfrkrf* another burst sounded off, maybe 15 meters in front. Flame's veil had stopped moving forward, and was starting waver. When it went, he would be sitting there exposed for all to see. He was dimly aware of more gunfire and explosions across flaming lines, and he wondered if far off on one flank Big Ilya and Red Ivan and crossed through to get around their wall of flame and Germans who followed doctrine, concentrated their forces there. Without that, they couldn't even get shots off when they came with their slaughtering weapons and jets of flame- fix them with a few people making a big show, and then try to get around, let a few shots off at an exposed engine or something. It was always hard, facing fast machines, swinging around and spewing fire like a flying

devil. Now he was bringing fire, making attacks, deciding what happened. No children being boxed into a ravine to be shot at like fish in a barrel, no, not this time.

He struck a dynamite stick fuse, and tossed it in a low arc through wavering flames, and then he did likewise with two of three sticks he had left, tossing them left and right. Already stick two was airborne, stick one had blown hard, extinguishing flame for a three foot section with its blast. Once all three had gone, there was a wide stretch of double trench exposed, first wide and waist deep, then later lined with sandbags. Only a thin screen of unburnt grass from an unburnt median would stand between him and snarling muzzles of machine guns. And so as soon as smoke started to clear, he had to dare to die, or else he'd end up like fleeing birds before him. He leapt up, ignited his last stick, grabbed his rifle, dove into trench one tossing stick four behind those distant sandbags, and then leapt through grassy median into trench two, ready to smash his gun stock into some devil machine gunner. Waiting for him was a mutilated torso in field gray and a destroyed machine gun. One of his sticks must have been damn near a direct hit. He began moving south zigging and zagging along trench walls, cautious both for waiting Germans and for sticks of dynamite or shots from his comrades. He found Little Ilya and Marta back to back, rifling through a dead German for grenades, cigarettes, or candies, and then they all took off moving south to finish clearing trenches of that demon host.

What kind of crossroads-deal with Tashkenti Sultans Red Ivan had struck to get rockets and dynamite, Igor could not know. He wondered, and probed at it- names he had heard whispered, Plamya, Wenzler, provided no answers to him. It didn't matter so much now. They had shot them all left in their building, taken a good share of explosives and machine guns and good fuel from Luftwaffe stores. Big Ilya planned to go south and try to sell choppers for war loot. No one here could fly them, but they might be able to buy a pilot with all they had secured. It felt unbelievably good, like being world champions, to have taken a base. Miraculously only a few had been shot, and none killed. It seemed, for now, that that hill witch had been right- they were immune to bullets.

Marta and Little Ilya would be disappearing with Big Ilya off south, and Igor worried about pangs of loneliness with only Red Ivan and his other men for company, but here too, their heroic victory provided salvation. Chorny and Bilyy, black and white, two little cats he had rescued from German devils, would be with him. Sweeter than sweetest German candy, more heart-warming than strong firestarter, his little fellows tumbled over each other, mewling and hissing like little balls of pure life. He had found them hiding in a garden trough of yellow daylilies, behind a great serpentine tongue of tarmac, their big amber eyes peering out amidst thick green leaves. He had lured them out with clicks of his tongue and mare's milk, gasping with delight at their little paws and soft fur and bird-like chirping. They would learn to live in a saddle-bag or on his riding blanket, spending evenings hunting for rodents around camps to come, and thinking of them growing from their tiny infancy made his heart pull at itself in many directions.

Hopefully they would keep accepting horse-milk. Red Ivan had made it clear that this was only step one, that there would be more firebases, and blockhouses, and soldier's settlements, and waste-grounds of German towns ahead on their land that they would find, after long days of riding across oceans of grass. Old fears about slaughtering machines were faded by victory's spring flush, and no one had even heard about a big bomber in months. Something was wrong with Germans, and there

was no better time than now to jump on them. Excitement filled evening campfires, and even hardened old men started singing folk songs of love again. Memories of pain, of loss, constant fears of *thrum-thrum-thrums* bringing burning jets of fire, of a missile jumping from a silent blue sky and tearing legs from children, fear of trucks of drunk soldiers looking for “bandits” and finding only women and infants... all these faded, like tears drying under prairie heat and sun. Where there had been torn hair and sallow skin, fresh roses and blossoms of hundreds of grasses sprung, and faces grew tanned and taught once again. Distant sights of more dark wings reassured him. Like Earth’s roots and seeds under blackened dirt-char, new life would spring up in their wake, under trampled clods of horse-hooves and scorch marks of their new tools—cheap dynamite, gasoline sparked prairie fire, and a hill-witch’s whispers. So long as big bombers didn’t return, so long as screaming jets kept away, and missiles rested in silos off in foreign distance, who could stop them? He stroked silky fur, one black, one white, hearing contentment, mewling sounds of new life and warm little hearts beating with his own.

17: Little House Under the Prairie Stars



He dreamed of black locks, long and curling, held burning brands of tar that raised a cloud of smoke around the pale face. A long dark beard stretched out below the fumes, and above rose a sheepskin drum of a hat. Below the beard, the apparition wore a dark green vest lined with black sable and shining buttons hammered from old cartridges. Tan leather bandoliers crossed his chest with an X of brass and lead. From behind the gray and acrid veil, a flash struck out, and ember lit, like a floating lock of hair tied to a new brand. And then, a voice guttural and dark like thunder sounded from the clouds, some strange polyglot tongue of traders and exiles and those who fled. Yet even such a strange mix was familiar enough to the ear that its sense was immediate and apparent. "Brother-men" the voice began, and then expounded a great lyric, the heroic charge of the shadow's uncle, a storming of the field and the destruction and burning of a fort. The sharp consonants like bolts of lightning in the eye of a whirlwind continued to fall. "It was here, on the plains of a river not so far nor so different, that one yoke was cast off long ago. It was here, on the plains of this very river, not so many generations ago, that another yoke was put on. Here, we must stand, brothers, and show that this yoke too will be broken" and then one hand of blackened leather reached and drew a shining saber, "To Death!"

A saber- heroic, but not warlike, it seemed, in this age of tarmac and tank-treads. Mobile cavalry with lances against the concrete strong houses of each little settlement, facing the guns that the rail companies still kept stored behind lines. What could the theatrics of flaming hair compare to the waves of yellow wind that forced themselves down mountain valleys, which choked the life from the revolts of chained men? Perhaps, in the end, theatrics were all that remained. Perhaps theatrics could win, shock and awe the men who made the concussive blasts and dancing flames which torched the yurts and herds of the plain. Maybe there was no way to trade material, no way to equate the number beaten and gassed to the cost of expended canisters, no way to claim victory from forcing a tax levy to fund some mobile horde on wheels and tracks that smashed camps and bones. Was there any trust that these brave sabbath-lovers, communists, fanatics, desperados and vengeurs would receive a nod of recognition as they were ground into the rich black dirt? Who, after all, could claim to expect a brotherhood of man to exist between the comfortable men in their pillboxes with tractors and mules, and those they had robbed? What redemptive reconciliation could convince men to part with their very way of life. Would fear of Krupp's bankmen, fear of drought, fear of damnation ever impart a brotherhood of blood to compare with the covenant that butchers had made when they shared their hot red essence, O to A to AB, little bonds of letters nesting at every shoulder? Was the water of life thicker yet than the blood of history? "To Death!" the cry sounded out, a great cheer "To Death! To Death!"

The man squinted over the rolling hills where the ankle high corn was deep into its brutal struggle with the weeds. Every year they came back stronger. He spat, a long nut-brown streak, into the crabgrass. When his Grandfather had moved from some failing coal town to the first farm plot in generations it had been a happy time. Now? If you didn't get the rains to come and go on a dime, you were done. Even out here, on the side of the river without official sanction. His jaws kept working the chaw in his mouth. The rains would come. Just three years ago he had picked up and left the well irrigated basin. Too many company men, too many railroad agreements. And then there had been the matter with Willie Beringer, which wasn't really such a big deal, but the taste it had left was too bitter for even the smoked tobacco to cure. *Pffft-hyunk* went the spit. He rubbed his smooth jaw, stood up, and looked out across the horizon. Pushed to the ends of the earth by the rail companies, out into this hot dry hell. Well, the stiffes in the Capitol might feel fine leaving citizens out to dry, but the mobile forces were still criss-crossing the land out here. No line of timber and concrete forts blocking the passes out from the northern mountains down here, just these wide,

wide, expanses. So much sod, springing up year after year in its thick mats, uncuttable without the steel plow he had managed to bring. But when it was gone, did the corn grow so thick or so well?

He hitched the mules- old fashioned, he knew, but he was a scrimper born and bred, as the late missus had said, and why waste gas on some leisurely stroll he could take with Ludwig? Maybe Ludwig and Georg minded hauling the cart and him too, but they burned hay, not the precious fuel he had to smuggle from navy patrols he'd run into on the river side. Two days there, two days back- hey, it probably saved them from that, so they should be grateful even! The mule cart pushed down the "road" that was forming from habitual abuse more than design, rolling down the plain across to the far field, where the wheat was kept. A real pickle here- the wheat was in a depression, so it could get more water, but that meant it was weak and decadent when the diseases came a-knocking. This year, dry as it had been so far, was alright, but it was like living on the edge of a knife. Too much rain- the rots would come, too little- the plants would crackle and dry. Either way, he could be left out to die with no bread, like during the blackest days of blockade, scrounging for rye and potato, even sawdust. The alternative was striking a deal with some prick who had never broken the ground, offering so many bushels of wheat and so many gallons of milk every year in exchange for some deep well to make the rain for him. Damned either way- but he had seen too many small farms pulled under and eaten by the big houses and the railway companies after a bad year of rust. Hadn't they fought so many wars for freedom, for liberty and equality of citizens? How could he let himself be bought up like some slave- well, that was that, he couldn't. Thrive or die, he would do it free. For today at least, the wheat was tall and the green of old copper, a wealth of bread in the bustling big heads from the spindly plants.

No splotches of rust, no heads bending too far over. Good. Of course, it wasn't as nice as the short thick stuff they had growing on the company lots, but the bread was bread. If it had been good enough for his people for thousands of years, well, who was he to spit on his grandfather's tomb? Ludwig and Georg, their sleek burnt-chestnut tops and creamy bellies warm in the sun, bent to snack on some of the berm-grasses and relieved themselves. Mules. Disgusting, but like a child, endearing. They seemed healthy. It was not a bad start to the season, all in all. He clicked the mules, and they turned back to the house. He took a little pride in it. Neat pine posts coated in resin and clay he'd fished from some logjam on the river, thick sod insulation around it all like a half-buried bunker, even big panes of glass that he'd carefully wrapped in the blankets and linens they'd driven out here. It was buried on what passed for a ridge among the soft slopes around here. The other side of the ridge... well, what was there was there, dead saplings and liferune and tomb. Dead, almond trees and fruit trees, carefully wrapped in wet soil and hemp cloth, leaned into the wagon loads hauled by the mules (mechanical and biological) out here, over the ferries, all this distance. And now? Well, Magda in her mound, maybe she saw them still so green and fresh as they had been that first may. He cut another plug of chaw, worked it into his mouth. *Pfft-hyuk* the sour juice flew. He unhitched the mules and sat on the shaded porch at the edge of the house, chewing the chew, jawing, waiting for the hole to fill for a minute under the big sun.

Inside the house, his boy Johann sat with the younger Fredrick and Wolf, going over basic math or reading Goethe. Long hot days of, well what his calendar at least called June, were slow out here. The heat might have been good for the plants, but if

all the hundred little maintenance projects of weeding and pruning and cropping and digging could be put off until the later evening they would be. In between, he oversaw the land, and Johann oversaw his younger brothers, who in turn oversaw the great triumphs of science and culture, even stretching out to illuminate the steppe. When they had still been living just west of Fort Hoth, when the winters were a little warmer and the summers cooled by a sea breeze, there had been a real school. He had still managed to see his daughters placed, the elder in a nursing camp, the other with the Young Women's Organization at their practical skills camp. Good educations for them, better to keep their happy faces away from this place of mourning. The boys on the other hand, he still needed for those busy days. Tears or no tears, the plants would ripen, the tobacco and tea would need to be hung to dry in a shack that would still need to be built, silage for the mules would need to be taken and dried, firewood, coal, and oil stocked. With all that ahead, one day of the week to rest and inspect and think was fine, or if not practical at least deserved.

Hours later, his jaw sore from chewing, his mouth sour and rotten, the boys out in the yard doing horseplay- necessary to have them train to grapple in these parts- he pulled a quail out of the smoked store, plated some boiled potatoes and cuts of bread on the Schindlerfabrik enamel plates he and Magda had gotten from his father so many years ago. The memory tugged the shape of a smile from the muscles around his face, so he faked a cough until it went away. The sun was still floating above the waving plain in the horizon when he brought out the plates onto the porch and called his boys over. They made some small talk, single sentences when single syllables weren't enough, about the wheat crop and geometry practice. Bellies full of the plains-chicken, sun starting to redden in a bloody sunset through the cloudless sky, he told the boys to grab their musical instruments- a harmonica for him, a guitar for Johann, Friederich young enough to hit the high notes singing with his voice, and little Wolf on a skin drum. No fancy pianos out here, but the old folksongs and party ballads were good to hear. The sun, below the horizon tainting the dark night with streaks of purple and delicate ribbons of yellow and green, and the steppe owls beginning to hoot, set the scene for another calm night. Then Johann disrupted it. "Father, I want to visit the Brandts and see if they need help." He doubted it was national comradeship as opposed to the Brandt's daughter motivating the request. Didn't matter. "Johann, I still need you here to look after your brothers, and help with the plots." "Father, if you could send Fred and Wolfie to a camp, it would do them good to see other boys their age. And I could just help out for a few days if they need it now." "We help them, and they help us, during bumper harvests or droughts. That's enough. They are proud and capable alone. So are we." "Father-" "Bed. Enough of this." Snappishly, almost. Too harsh, he could see that in Johann's eyes. The boy would learn.

The morning light, pre-dawn pale blue edging out the violent night, streamed into the eastern window, illuminating his face, the dark brown beard (unshaven for nearly a year), his burnt and tanned face, pushing into his closed eyes. Was it a warning or a siren call, calling out to each generation "East, young man, go east for our people". Below the window the pink carnations were looking full and brilliant in the pale light. He roused himself with cold water, slipped into his thick coveralls and put on his hat and light shirt. He moved quietly- the sun wasn't fully up yet, so he could let the boys sleep in their bunks still- and took his knife and set to work. As he was cutting the carnations he noticed that somebody or something had gotten there before him and broken about a dozen stems of the bright flowers earlier, only a few

hours early by the freshness of the wounds and the welling sap in them. He pondered this as he carried his own armful of the lovely folds, the delicate rosy petals in their enchanting maze of shapes. So disorderly compared to a field, and yet so lovely. No animals would graze the flowers like that. Ludwig and Georg were put into their fence at night. The manger- that would need to be expanded too, it wasn't very nice for them in the winter. Yes. But, no- the carnations. Someone had taken them. A red savage? A bandit? A warning? Hmmm. As he reached the dead grove the question remained unsolved. In the middle of what might once have been a green orchard, a little mound of rocks, fieldstones sat. On it, the liferune was placed, made from lovingly jointed yew wood. Oh, Magda. He recited a private poem, their favorite of the great poet's work, silently to her. And then it was time to get back to work.

After 3 hours chopping thistle away from the potatoes and tobacco, he made his way to the shade of the porch. He spooned out a little portion of the dried tea leaves he had carried when they had trekked away from the rail and the coast, moved gingerly from the store room to the stove where his kettle was, and dumped it in with careful precision. He pushed in some wood shavings and a lit match and then a coal chunk. The stove had a gas line option, but the house had no gas, so he had modified it with a flat iron sheet to burn wood and coal. Soon enough he'd have his cup. He cut a chunk of bread and spread some dark red jam across it, and sat at the table where Wolfie was hard at work on his geometry. He ruffled the boy's tuft of nut-brown hair. "Well, lad, hard at work alone. Your brothers out in the fields yet?" he asked. Wolf looked up with trepidation. Right at that moment, Freddie barged in as if he had been waiting outside the door. "Father. Johann is gone." "What do you mean to say Friederich?" "He's gone. He wasn't here this morning. We didn't see him. I started Wolfie on his math and then went out to hoe the corn. I thought he might be out already. He's gone, Father." He sat there with his bright red face and shimmering eyes full of temerity like he had just unweighted his soul before a priest. Well, that explained the carnations, he thought as dryly as he could. The kettle started to whistle.

The morning light, pre-dawn pale blue edging out the violent night, streamed into the eastern window, illuminating his face, the dark brown beard (unshaven for nearly a year), his burnt and tanned face, pushing into his closed eyes. Was it a warning or a siren call, calling out to each generation "East, young man, go east for our people". But no. It wasn't another morning. Johann was gone. A second day. In the night he'd had a bizarre dream that giant bats with foaming mouths, real monsters not like the fake innocent who had attacked lovely Magda, chased Johann across the plain while he watched frozen and helpless. Now, in the light of day, he felt sorrow in his heart mixing with strain and anger. So much work left to do. How could he leave his little boys alone when he drove back to the ferry town to pick up supplies and sell whatever surpluses he had? Friederich... no he wouldn't be old enough yet, despite his strong show yesterday. Well, there just wasn't anything else for it. If it had to be done it would have to be done. The girls would be back soon enough and in time for the harvest. Things would work out without that stupid proud child. Of course, the inconvenience he caused was balanced out by the absence of a hungry mouth, so he didn't really miss him. But he had taken Ludwig. Georg was a good mule, but he wasn't two mules. That was a real hardship, an almost unforgivable one. Of course, better have a mule for company than be eaten by wolves out here, but better still to not have taken his mule. Well, what can you do? So what could you do? He groaned, got up, and splashed cold water on his face in cold water from the basin. It splashed

off his face, rolling in fine clear droplets on the dark wood of the wash bench, soaking and making dark the towel cloth.

The sun was bright and hot, still rising in the cloudless blue, the half moon hanging visible high in the early morning sky as he wandered down to what passed for the gulch on the south side of the ridge. The broad green leaves and the pale gray branches tipped with their delicate yellowish fingers sat brooding. Still no rain, but no cause for worry. Cheery and bright face upward, back at the sun. The elderberries would live, either way, but rain now would mean more jam come the fall when they would burst droplets of black-red sugar and color, splash it across the landscape from their little depression. More than anything else, the color and that sweet taste cut with sour helped get the children through the long winter month they spent here. He would try and get them into camps, but who knows the price of that or the price that wheat would fetch by the time he carted a wagonfull back to the ferry-town. Well, what can you do? He was focused closely enough on the stems, inspecting for cankers, on the leaves looking for spot, all around, looking for whatever greedy berry-louse was trying to steal from him to notice the horizon. To the south, over his left shoulder, as the gulch rose and leveled with the little house-ridge, and then further than that, further out across the waste of sod where the Huber's little concrete blockhouse sat, a column of smoke was rising. No clarion call or ringing tocsin here- just a silent spiteful pillar of char spewing out of the place where a family had been. Of all the fucking times for Ludwig to have gone missing, and then he smacked his face for the mental curse. He had to find his boys, he had to get them inside. They were drilled for this, prepared for this, what family wouldn't be out here, but to drill and to face the real flames, well, so what else could be done?

The back end of the little timber and turf farm house had some wood paneling with a little knot of hemp rope set just so small a loop that a finger could slide in, right close to a bunk. Georg had been set loose. Friedrich and Wolf, thank heavens, were right behind him, his rifle and his knife in hand. The boys had gallon jugs of water and salted quail and bread in their arms, straining their little backs and arms. "Don't worry" he advised as he pulled out the paneling, swung a steel door into the back of the ridge. The little secure store room had boxes, heavy metal tins covered in olive green paint and little yellow letters, which he started moving out. "Friedrich, if we are pressed hard, you may need to stay inside here and keep Wolf with you. You will have this food and water. But if I close that door, no matter what you hear outside you must not come out until there is no more noise." He looked very seriously at Freddie, the little brown mole on his cheek, the somber ice gray eyes. "Do you understand, my son?" Those serious gray eyes nodded. He chuckled Wolf on the head. "Don't worry. The turf is thick around the wood planks. We have my rifle, and you boys can run ammunition and cool barrels, help me load and move. You've practiced for something like this. Just think of it like another drill-game." He cut a chaw of tobacco. He stopped and looked at it. Before something like this? He popped it in and started chewing. The house was pleasant, thanks to the insulating sod walls, clean and orderly and free of the buzzing flies and disease that the raiders lived in. Why couldn't men just learn to leave each other well enough alone?

Hours passed in tense silence. He went back and forth, putting up and taking down the heavy wood slats behind the glass windows. No movement, just the murmuring grasses and young plants, which he could have been tending too if not for that disgusting black pillar dead south, greasy and tall in the sunlight. His Gods

would give him strength. His rifle and his boys, every sinew and trained muscle would stay strong. Barbarian red savages wouldn't push civilization out of here. He may have fled from the decadent cities and scheming businesses back in the old home, but here in the new home those cities and businesses better ought to understand their duty. Surely the mobile troops would respond to the fires on the prairies, come streaming in to defend their kinsfolk. He started cleaning the gun with a steel brush and some grease. Presently, however, something did move on the horizon. A new spurt of that black smoke, like a burst artery from the soil itself sprang up. The Meier's plot in the west no doubt. Had they had time to flee? Had they been forewarned by the Huber's plight, and forearmed? Overconfident men, but surely not so stupid. Still, even on horse, the smoke was hours of riding away. Maybe they wouldn't reach this stead before the nightfall, maybe they would break and rest before... but already this was untrue, a group of five riders were there breaking the flat line of the horizon. He grabbed one of the long steel tubes next to the window. He screwed it into the body mounted on its swinging metal pivot, clicked the brass cartridges in with their long iron belt. As the horses got closer, his finger was already feeling the tense spring of the trigger as he recognized Alfred Meier, all 14 years of him, riding like the wind in front of his mother and sisters.

Disaster! Red Oriental Uprising! Is that what the businessmen with their scheming newspapers would write about his body, pushing the rail further out here, running him down like a fleeing dog? Well, he had surely made his bed and would sleep in it, anchored to this place by Magda's memory and the soil. The Mayer group reached his house, dismounting. Alfred rapidly ran to knock, but he was already opening the door and stepping onto the porch- a very undignified collision. Putting that aside, Meier began to speak. "We saw the Huber's plot go up this morning. My father sent me to take my mother and sister's to be placed under your care, and then told me to ride off for the mobile forces" He could see old Adolf Meier's Leuger pistolette in the saddle of Al's horse. "And your father? Where is he?" and pain began to fill the boy's face. "He stayed behind to close things up and hide what grain he could from these bolsheviks. It's just like the stories about them, coming to eat us out of house and home, like a pack of locusts. He said he'd ride after us, try to meet up with us, but we haven't seen him yet." "Don't worry boy," he said, putting his hand on Alfreds back. "We'll survive this. I'm sure your father will ride here and we'll hold 'em off together just fine. We have to- and we always have here." Alfred did not look so re-assured as he had hoped. "Freidrich! Fetch a loaf of bread, a cut of quail, a jar of the elderberry syrup and a flask of water! Full steam now!" As Alfred was eating (too quickly, in the way that boys will) he checked the saddle straps and got the Mayer horses all linked up to ride as a group. "You take these too, boy. No place for them here, and you can swap to keep them fresher as you ride. Now be fast, and don't waste time dawdling and looking back."

Mrs. Meier set her three girls, from 6 to 12, working at gathering water from the little reservoir tank, firewood and brush for cooking, making sure there was food supplied, all with a calm head and determined expression. Serene to the point of placidity, none of Magda's fire, but a fine frontier woman to be sure. His boys, he set to work clearing grass from the little rolls and dips around the cabin- to keep them calm and busy just as much as to clear firing lines for himself. He made sure, then, to show Mrs. Meier the safe room in the back. He was dismayed however to hear her response. "I'll let no man, Mr. Bauer, risk my darlings falling into the hands of such primitives as those who have no laws. If the house is in danger of falling, I demand

you be a man.” and she gestured so as to make her point clear. He knew that Magda would not have asked that. She would have hid deep with the boys. But, what could you do? He nodded, unsure if he was intending to keep his agreement. She insisted that he verbally promise, and no amount of squirming could get him out of that. Well, he’d do what he could. The long arc of the sun on these early summer days meant that the tension of looking out across the grasses and fields stretched agonizingly late, but eventually the great orb-light sank below the horizon-line. He set Friedrich to take the first watch, telling him to wake him when Mars- he carefully tested the boy, made sure he could pick out that pale red star from the other planets- sank below the horizon. “And remember, shake me awake, silently, if you see or hear anything unusual.” He then tried to sleep curled awkwardly, in one of the boy’s bunks having surrendered his own bed to the Mayers. As he left his son to stand guard atop the hill, in the growing dusk he could see Venus beginning to shine in the West, a horizon so far free of any of the ugly black pyres, his secure homeland signaling a beacon from on high.

It was still and dark when Freddie shook his shoulder and he sprang up as he had laid down, fully dressed. The boy looked very tired, but still managed to whisper out the all clear. He nodded, tousled his son’s hair, and careful to avoid creaking boards, crept outside and mounted the hill with his binoculars. A thick cut of chaw helped him wake up and stay clear, the bitter juice and stimulating movement staving off the vestiges of sleep. The night was fresh and clear and still, no breeze, no risen moon yet, the stars gleaming in their hundreds out here away from the city lights. How many nights had he spent like this with Magda curled in his arms? A lump started to rise in his throat when he thought of her, restrained and foaming on the drive back to the Fort-town and the rail, hoping beyond hope for a cure. And then removing the poxy animals with flame from their summer tree-perches had been so easy. If only, if only, he spat out a stream of juice, what could you do? He grabbed his binoculars and scanned the sky for anything. Along the astral plane, Jupiter climbed over the eastern edge of the sky. He couldn’t make out much of the moons, even with the binoculars, but he was getting lost trying to when a nearby owl hooted loudly, sending him diving and rolling the grass. He was half-way down the hillock when he got control of himself and slithered back up to the top. Calm, still, he cut a fresh cut of chaw and spat out the old plug. Indulgent yes, but in times like these what else? Hunting field-mice now, probably, the owl swooped as a shape, darker than even the dark distance of heaven, down. Had they hunted the bats? What had the bats hunted, bugs? Perhaps spiders had moved into their place. Not that it mattered- animals, one and all, none with loyalty or culture, not like a mule or a faithful hound.

The moon, thicker than half, rose in its dainty pale color brightening the east. Good for him- if anyone was riding out from the Meier’s place at this time, they’d be set alight by moon-beams, revealed to him from the safety of the dark ridge-top. Out in the south, some yipping howls started, maybe at the sight of the moon, maybe at the discovery of the Huber’s last remains. Savages. He spat, no juice this time, just a plain measure of disgust. Worse than the wolves, a perpetual savagery on these plains. Unfit to be treated like men, in his opinion, more like some infected nest of bats or rats, fit only for the flames. Smoke ‘em out. His joints felt old and stiff, and the wetness of a faint dew was forming on the grass, getting into his tough cotton pants and jacket. The moon having been up for an hour or so (he guessed from its position), he spat out his chaw and went to get Wolfie to sit on the porch. Less than an hour until the sun started to rise, and the youngest were always better at early mornings than the others. He’d get a little sleep, and be fit and ready for whatever the day and the dawn brought.

He shook his littlest boy awake, gave him a cup of water and a little tobacco staining kiss on the cheek, and told him to keep an eye outfront until he got back up. Wolfie, rubbing the sleep from his little eyes, invisible in the darkness of the house, nodded and stepped out. He took off his slightly damp clothes, hung them from the bunk, and curled into the thin blanket and the warmth of bed.

It must have been at least a couple hours later that he stirred on his own. He had somehow gotten a blanket wrapped around his head insulating him from the morning light. Still, it was early, the sky was faintly lit and the sun hadn't risen too far yet. Mrs. Meier had a kettle of tea going, for which he was grateful. He also saw that Friedrich was still asleep- let him sleep a little more yet, he thought. Outside little Wolfie had the binoculars and was grimly scanning the horizon, a dutiful little soldier already! The Meier girls were at work turning his store of flour into bread and hardtack "I hope you won't mind, but in case we need to last out a siege, we'll be better off for it" she said. He thought, though, that the continued absence of her husband Adolf was weighing on the whole group. Suddenly, Wolf let out a cry "Papa, papa, come quick, there's horses riding to us!" The slow movements of kneading dough and stoking a fire froze, and then burst into frenzy. Friedrich stumbled out of bed. The heavy wood shutters were swung up, and the fire snubbed out. He drained the big mug of tea, hot and burning and so painful on his throat, wake up fast now, and he pulled the big rifled gun out, and hastily put it through the firing slit in the thick door, cutting and scraping bits of skin on the hard metal parts. The reserve barrels and a bucket of water were put by his side, and Freddie took his side, ready to hand him belts. The porch faced North-East so it took the better part of a half hour for the galloping horde to enter sight of the narrow slit, but even then he held off firing. The riders had to have seen chimney smoke earlier although it had surely stopped by now, and they moved in with caution.

Twenty of them, in thick wool and hats, faces wrapped in cloth and cartridges of ammunition running across their bodies advanced. A motley collection of rifles, some that his grandfather would have found antiquated, some modern and black from recent pilfering. They spread out and stayed low to the flat ground- no cover of long grass for these butchers! When a good group got close enough, he flexed his finger. The tripod of the gun had long nail-claws that stuck into the wood planks of the floor, leaving ugly scratches but holding it in place for the work ahead. A sound like the Hebrew God tearing a veil rang out, a rending shredding tearing sound followed by the clatter of hot brass around his feet. Another click and burst, another tearing of the veil. Outside the redskins and Ivans had been taken by surprise, the large bullets leaving them scattered. The smarter ones had run to the sides, out of sight of the door-slit, but many had scattered back across the cleared lawn towards their horses, leaving their exposed backs easy prey for his tool. Outside some of them groaned and rolled. He didn't waste his time shooting them. It was hard and harsh, and he even felt bad for them. In the baking noon-sun they would wish to be dead instead of thirsty and lame, but he couldn't waste bullets on mercy, and he couldn't let their comrades simply pick them up for safety. It was war to the death out here, no room for mercy. Why did they do this? Why wouldn't they leave the settlements alone? It would only have been better for those sorry bastards too, but in their animal hate they must not have seen that.

The advance of the enemy temporarily abated, he treated himself to a drink of water, unscrewed the barrel which was hot but not too hot for gloves, and replaced it

with another. He knew what would come next. He instructed a couple of the Meier's to ready cloths and water, so as to keep the door cool. No flames would be hot enough to cook through the feet of sod around them, but the front of the house could be burned down, exposing him to hidden rifles in the distant grass. You could already hear the occasional dull thud of a round that hammered into the thick hardwood facade, but he doubted they had any guns big enough to break through. So as long as they kept the wood wet, they would hold out indefinitely. Then, suddenly, he heard a gentle thud as something rolled onto the porch from the above.

He had carried the timber for the facade with the family in the big wagon hauled by his seldom used tractor and the mules. He had spent long hours in the hot sun, the family set up in a tent, working on sowing late corn and then winter wheat while he dug and dug and dug, chopped the occasional tree from the plain, sawed and hammered and nailed. The house had rose, agonizingly slow, bit by bit by bit, Johann helping when the sowing was done, Magda watching the children, as the stove went in and the chimney came out, as the heavy front "Strong enough to stop Genghis Khan" he had proudly boasted was raised and mucked into position, layers and layers of the sod they busted mounted on the hill and the tin bones of the sod-house, so cozy and so free! The precious glass windows, the beds stuffed with down from plains-chickens (really, quail, but that sounded less civilized), the bunks and the store room, even the porch and the thatch chairs. All by hand, the sweat of his brow, hours of painful and loving and rough work done freely. The blast of the hand-grenade destroyed the two years of hard work in less than a second. The support to his left buckled and caved and smacked Friedrich and... he couldn't look any further. He was hit dead on by a hefty oak plank and thrown into the back wall. The big gun tipped over, spilling ammunition everywhere. Two of the delicate windows shattered, shutters blowing in, shards of that precious ethereal crystal scattering like shrapnel among the sheltering people, too secure to have hidden in the safe room.

He came too again, maybe half a minute later, coughing up lots of phlegm, maybe too watery to be phlegm, all in his mouth, like he was drowning. Something in his chest and his back didn't feel correct. Mrs. Meier was stumbling around, dazed, seeming to reach for one of the kitchen knives, her girls cowering. Wolfie was tugging at his shoulder, opening his mouth like a mute fish. Then an apparition appeared out of the boiling sun which poured in through the wrecked doorway. Wreathed in smoke and ember and furs, it pointed a gun and it exploded at Mrs. Meier who had finally grabbed the knife and was trying to pick herself up and turn. But, strangely, the gun was silent too, and then he knew. A large black burly beard descended from the smoking head, and for a second he thought he saw the outline of some cruel face, narrow eyes and a beakish nose, but then the shadow of the sun in the smoke shifted and it was a ghast again. Other cossacks started streaming in, gray wool jackets and loaded guns, going for the children to haul them off. Cloud-head looked up and made a gesture and suddenly the men all seemed to scramble. One was reaching to grab Wolfie, his littlest boy, when he saw movement. The cold round barrel of a pistol swung down towards his head. He knew it was better than he could expect from a barbarian savage against the civilized machine gunner, but "Please, not in front of my boy"

18: The Whirlwind in the Thorn Tree



Brown faces on little bodies danced around the front of the street, barefoot but well dressed in colorful dresses, tossing bouquets of white roses and singing as they went. Behind them, the best men in the community came, a mix of stiff silk top hats and flat gray officer's hats emblazoned with the white eagles of the retiree's league. They moved slowly, to the sound of a fife and drum group playing mourning songs and national hymns. Behind this group, an honor guard of Tatar cavalry in armored cars, polished chrome gun barrels and hubcaps gleaming out from the green-brown dapple of camouflage, and then behind the square rear-hatches and shining polished exhausts, six horses, three white, three black, hugely bulky and massive animals, muscles rippling under their sleek chest hair, eyes covered with black leather and silver rings. Behind them, a great carriage of midnight black cast iron and birch the color of bleached bone, on on the flat of this ceremonial war-cart a great marble rectangle with an intricate carved face of the dead Hero. Following this, an army of men and women, secretaries and soldiers and civilians of all industries and walks of life, dressed in stiff black, some the silver embroidered Security Staff clothing, some embroidered with white starch of high society, all marching in lockstep behind the thing that had been the man who had governed their frontier world.

White rose petals lined the streets, and the hundred flags, of rank and nation and race hung limp and silent in the hot still summer air. Despite the failure of his only progeny, the man was still enough of a legend that his body was being moved to the garden-fort that he had made his own palace of civilization amidst the savagery of the land, to become his final resting place. Under the marble edifice, the body rotted, bacteria and fungi devouring first the flesh and fat that bore his only true legacy; and then themselves. Already, under the calm marble deathmask bone edged out of the fetid meat and moldering uniform of bronze and cloth. Lead lining sealed the odors of rot and fester behind the cold and pure white marble face, the crystals of quartz and the unpolished and sensually rough stone. Lead did not line the mass graves where little towns and huts, winter camps and summer farms had stood; the houses of starched society erected themselves over the rot that filtered into the land, the bloody taste that infected the water ever spring when the bodies of the starved under the huge lakes in this marble man's domain liquified and joined the land where they had lived and for which they had died. His body would not join those, destined instead to remain both apart and physically above them, encased in eternal stone and glass, like spent uranium. Look close- can you see the tears on the faces of his followers? Can you hear their muffled sobs? Can you bring yourself to care for those beasts?

Hate crossed Chief Joseph's heart like fangs of ice scissoring, a beating organ in his cold and empty chest. It pressed against his chest like a weight of stones crushing him. Waking up was always so, hate pressing down, and then memories that caused hate tearing their way in through a veil of dream. A loose gray fog was draping itself over flat drab prairie grasses, steam threads of life, translucent cloth over a body, made damp by the wet hair of grass, barely hiding curves that rippled like flesh across flat land in places high and low. Sunlight would soon burn away any variegation, a world left hot and dry and disappointingly bare, endless plot of grass after endless plot of grass, barely broken by so much as a shrub.

When his heart's hate had first taken seed, it had been different. His youth had been, well he could barely remember. It felt like a different life, an eternity ago. Furs and birch cabins, sod, bags of food hung high between trees out of reach of bears, spots of moss and spots of mold, plates of fungi colored like rainbows or gaping with pale fanged mouths in the short summer nights like packs of howling wolves, splotches of birds in bright clothes and whistles of birdsong. Green leaves and shade and damp earth, not baked hard or held like cement by grass root, earth as a thin red and black humus under the molder of last year's foliage, taiga hunts and hymns

around campfires. Of course, one thing that was there, like a scar, a white spiderweb tracing as far back as hate, was death. It lingered behind drumbeats of horse hooves, and soared with eagles behind clouds out here; but even in black woods it had lurked, a beast behind rotting logs and in ravines, under pits of permafrost that gave way to break bones and bodies, and in pneumonias that crept into mouths of sleeping infants and ate them whole. It festered in bear claws or in midwinter day-time frosts when skeleton trees bore only dim black sunlight. In one crevasse, where death hunted in calls of wolves and bloody coughs of men, his heart had fallen, listening to his mother's retching and sickness, like so many in those days, dying. No one noticed or cared, no medicine men bringing anything, and his father, busy looking for other brides to replace his defect. In the sick tent, alone, drabbling willow broth on her lips as they faded from rosy red to dead white, and stiffened with cold, death had come to him, given him seed, blood from boney wrists, tears as salty and smokey as hellfire, seed which he watered and nurtured, blood to blood, with his father who did not care, with older boys who did not care, with old women who did not care, cutting his way with his message "Hate all uncaring; Damn them, and grind their bones so that they may be shown how to care for our pain, how to feel it as their own," spreading. Pain, blood, fire, he brought them all from the North, forging husbands in winter baptisms, holding heads under freezing water, making them show that they cared, cared enough to suffer and then enough to maim and kill. Finally, decades in the sheen, blurred and forgotten behind frost-damaged nerves and saddle-sores and blisters galore, he had come to a sea's edge; and beyond grassy oceans, found nations who did not care. They did not care what the bombs they made did. They did not care where slaves they starved lived. They did not care where men whose farms they burned went; or where herdsmen whose livestock they slaughtered wasted away. They did not care for the woods they turned into coffins, or for air which they filled with smoke and disease. They did not care when children forced into stone ghettos got dysentery, or when servants they beat died from sepsis in the lash-wounds.

No words, no murmurs of dissent or contrary exposes could convince him that here, in this nation of hundreds of millions, in this hell-cauldron of a *European* melting pot, waiting for him soft and weak and unaccustomed to pain, really cared. He could have brought swords, like the Lord had done to Sodom where they raped their guests. He could have turned the ones who watched into pillars of salt and castles of sand with merciful swiftness. He might have revealed in the blood of quick and violent deaths, heady with informed use. But pleasure-seeking was for the weak, for those who couldn't force themselves to care. Instead he came to evangelize, to teach, to inform. Pain had taught him to care; to care for his mother. To care for all the others who died, far away in tents where missiles might land, but prophylaxis could never reach. He was dead. He was in hell. But he was still saved, saved by the words that let him care, saved by the ringing of the judgment bell. And so he would teach even Huns to care, let them learn what suffering was so that they could be sucked into hells of seeing themselves and knowing their actions. Some who died along the way were righteous trophies of demons, and his cloak of matted scalps reminded him of his failures and his sins of excess. For each and every dead, he took as a reminder, a hair shirt of his own callous mistakes, and dried blood on the scalps nourished forests of hate that he fell from towards ripe soft lands of careless ones.

A shame that he found ripe fruits of black earth hidden behind a thick layer of concrete, like soft oyster flesh underneath calcified shell, and this was a great calcified shell stretching unitary in tide worn ridges and forward firebases from Abomination's

cities, built on mass graves of victims it had never learned to care for. Wide expanses of grass and rock between Our People and the shell of Enemy was to his eyes a vibrating mesh of energy, dangerous and challenging, and it kept him from educating the masses there of their duties to himself, to each other, to all others. On one hand, sun and grass and wind brought energy, energy of men on foot and horses on hoof, kilograms of mass in flesh and in lead bullets and in thick-grained gunpowder from licks of saltpeter in the mountains and forest-charcoal. On its other, kilotons of metal powered by dead oil and coal, pounding across and above land, impacting not even with their own considerable force but instead launching explosions of energy across the scape, little sunbursts of energy which burnt grass and shredded life, organ by bursting organ. If you figured differences between a stampeding horse pummeling a Hun's kidneys and a single potato-masher liquifying a liver, how many head did the foes war-herd hold above their own? This was what they called an ivory tower dispute, something for egg-heads in distant gleaming castle towers to flaunt before preening Lords of inequity, like jesters cracking jokes. Even riding out into the plains with baggage of furs, metals, or wood was to invite death from above, the strafing planes and killing bombs that could appear from a silent blue sky. Of course, they weren't so much of a thing to do in the villages and creeks. After all, if there was anything to take cover in, even a slit-trench or caved in rabbit warren, even a grassed over crater, you could get to better than even odds of not getting torn and blown and intolerable tossed into the loving arms of each ever present death.

That's why a tear of good luck was something he treated with suspicion. Sure, most of the time there were no planes, and when there were planes, odd rockets or short bursts of strafe was all they would spare. But they were always lurking, just beyond his periphery. To abandon frontiers, to allow his band of three hundred to mass, to allow three hundred such bands to mass along southern peaks- and just think if they managed to crack oysters open, maybe even make out some pearls from tender meat already inside. Three thousand bands might pour out. Maybe their lap dogs in Kazan, held in bondage, or those they'd confined to the worst of marshland in exchange for "peace" and quiet, maybe they'd want to go pearl-diving themselves. That was star-eyed to think, but he smelt an opportunity to fulfill his duty, to show that he cared, maybe to make a thousand Hun families care before they brought him down. Blockhouses, farmhouses, trenches, air bases, Army-Navy forts, armored patrols, riverboats, all these deadly encounters could be snuck around in ways that dangers of a diving bomb on the grassland sea just couldn't be.

If they could have scrapped the Hunnic air fleet, they might have been alright, but as it was Huns who had put them aside. Well; *some* Huns had set *some* guns aside. Obviously, a group of three armored vehicles, militia men hanging on to their rails in a mix of field-gray and flannel included, were still armed, heel to teeth. Maybe they had heard about Gatherings out here, and were wandering their ways down ravines, hunting. The grass, bronzed auburn and gold from rainless weeks of dry heat that had lingered on through June days, rippled behind thick wheels and wide tracks of trucks and big oil tanks they bore. Sunrise came early, almost earlier today than any other morning of a year, bar one. Oat pods hung this month, usually crisp green and full of delightful milk, waving in half-wild fields, some fallow farm cultivation. This year they were dry, burnt to sockets and hollowed out. Horses and men of his picket command were scattered across three hundred acres, a loose net that was slowly swinging around an armored group, enveloping them like sea-grass. Three prongs, and then a shaft in reserve behind its net- Ol' Joseph Bluehands knew what he was

doing. Hot summer days had a way of dragging out, long and longer, and in solar heat, water had a way of running out before daylight. Unlike Huns who carried water with them, his people had to rely on sending youth down to rivers to replenish canteens and buckets, and it was always hard to watch them struggle with weight, especially in such parching heat. And of course, it was muddy and always foul with corruption.

Through wind-waved grass, men bound with bundles of dried grasses and oat spikes wadded and crouched, all but invisible to eyes, and in warm sun drenched landscapes invisible to Hunnic heat vision. As stars emerged, their bodies would begin to glow bright against the cooling vegetation, but without rapturous planes above, they were more free to move around hidden from view of armored columns that drove relentlessly towards their summer tent camp through vastless, endless steppe.

Sun had set on them, hunter and prey, and Hunnic patrols decided to take a rest. If it had just been professional soldiers... he had heard tales of men who kept moving and fighting for three, four, days on end, huge gas reserves and superhuman tablets keeping them moving long beyond what any normal man and his horse could do. Thankfully, large numbers of men gripping the rails of half-tracks, swarming like ants in fading, distant twilight, were only human, lazy farmers and drunks probably.

Up above them, glass tears in the sky sparkled. He saw Chulpan, iridescent and fleeing as if it was being hunted by red Mars, and shivered in dissipating midday heat's dusky chill. Land cooled fast here, not like woodlands, all day's warmth vanishing as quickly as it arrived. He knew, although he could not see, that in land's smallest dips, or on the dexter side of miniscule rises, his people were gathering in groups of two or three, passing nighttimes between them, half asleep and half awake, waiting for roaring thrums of Hunnic engines to reverberate across flat landscapes like air alarms. Shifting his glass tube that had once been attached to a rocket launcher, he turned it to gaze moonward, already risen full and still yet rising Westward. A craggy face of blasted gray rock and marble-white landscape, gleaming like some Sultan's castle against black crepuscule of night transfigured sky.

Later, how much later, he could only guess from minute movements of its immense lunar mass, he turned away and galloped back, reached his "shaft" of fifty-five horse warriors each with two extra steeds in tow, putting aside great groups of dismounted people sneaking through the tall grasses as a great net. He knew that contact would begin tomorrow when Huns found their camp empty of their victims, women and children for slaves and men for bounty scalps and war trophies, as if they were not men and women and children but only things to be gathered and harvested with no care. He had to begin stoking the fire of hate in his heart, for if it was not hot and hard steel in morning light, how could it hold under withering fire of Hunnic guns? How could it hold as hot blood from his brothers and sisters sank into baked grassland sod, clotting it thick and thicker, leaving children without parents and parents without children? It had to be done, or they would perish and wither and vanish as a people, leaving only Huns who took what they might and made no obeisance to other things.

He slept in his unfolded saddle blanket, keeping off Earth's cooling hide, and waited for dreams to come as they always did. He woke in familiar desert enfilades, where multicolored tents of red and white wool cloth rose against the sheer backdrop of some canyon. Green and gray desert scrub shaded stony ground above dusty rills,

and fed packs of camels and herds of sheep that slaves and serving-men drove about tent encampments. He made his way through sweltering sun on desert plains into rocky enfilades, strange lines and stacks of color in rough local landscape grain, and bowed his way into a tent. Its floor was lined with a tapestry of gold-threaded carpet and purple dies and midnight black and moon-white patterns carving strange shapes against starlight shadows of backdrop. Sunlight threatened to burst through white and red wool stripes, turning them semi-translucent where shade from canyon walls did not shelter them, his only source of illumination for graven images of a bearded patriarch, long and curling gray beard scraping against a teak-wood face and aquiline eyes. He bowed, man to lord, and shuffled his knees across the carpet, feeling friction burns from rough threads against his kneecaps.

His face was pressed close against cloth robe that covered folded legs, and he could feel his cheeks beginning to grow hot as tension rose. "Tell me, o' father, what I must do," he spoke. Elderly hands began to stroke his hair. "By swords you will conquer, my son. With flames and torches you will begin long delayed rightings of iniquities that have befallen you and your band. O' you must, with force, re-build the land and sow seed anew in the ripe dark earth." Their breaths were unsynchronized and ragged, each harder and hotter and rougher than the previous. His mouth, slightly agape, was now wetting the man's loincloth with his moist breath, his lips parting with anticipation at every pant. The patriarch brushed his hand down along Joseph's face, gently running a finger along his nose as he reached for the cloth, the engorged warmth of the other man springing up and making-

CONTACT. GET THE FUCK UP. JOSEPH, JOSEPH someone was shaking him with fury. "JOSEPH! JOSEPH! WE HAVE TO GO!" somewhere distant a huge booming sound crashed out across the flat grassland. "GET UP! GET UP! THEY'RE FUCKING PUNCHING THROUGH THE NET!" somehow he was awake enough to belt- who was it who was cursing? Olga, in broken Tatar, belt her on the mouth. "Watch the language." he said curtly, rolling the blanket he had been so comfortably curled around a minute ago, and tossing it on his shoulders. His right hand pushed down his short gray-brown hair, and then donned the wide brimmed black wool and thatch hat of the plains. His left hand was already cradling the ornate rifle the miners had offered him, and as if by their own design his feet were slipping into the fur boots. "Down by the creek bed?" he asked Olga who he had hit harder than he meant to, with softness, trying to save the cresting hate in his breast for the beasts who really deserved it. She nodded bitterly, then turned to wake anyone else she could find. He glanced around, saw the men on their horses, rubbing sleep from their eyes. The sky was agate gray, like the scars on birchwood trunks, the sun not risen, but already lit gray with light on this longest day. His cock was already down, but his pants-crotch was wet.

More booms crashed across the grasses, rustling the vegetation in big shock waves, and then a sound like a slipping chain roared. Machine-guns. Contact had been made, that much was clear. They would wait, half an hour. It was nervous work. No runners were coming- obviously. The flat terrain meant that to move was to die, the guns in the hand of the minute militia's and the automatic cannon of the soldiers on the armored cars suppressed even a rustle of grass. The plan was that waves of men would jump up at once and launch Tashkenti rockets at the Hun. If they could break the cannons, they would have a real shot at an all out cavalry rush with rifles panicking the Hun and making them run. If. The plan was that three "prongs" of waves, from different directions would each try and rush, but he had no idea how

contact had been made, or really even if the “prongs” of men camouflage in the grass could get together. If the Huns started to drive around in their tanks, they might stumble on a prong at incredibly close range, where the rockets could do real damage. Maybe that had happened. Maybe they should already have been plunging towards the sound of battle, but if a column of horses rode up, they’d be torn apart in thirty seconds by a working cannon. The loose net of men with rifles, hand guns, and homemade grenades would hopefully keep the Hun on his toes, lumped together, and confined to the armor, and then suppress any brave soldier who tried to fire back. That was the plan anyway. If, if, if. He turned around to look at the men. It was a motley group, white and bay horses who were less obvious to planes as they crossed the parched grass lined up in five columns behind him, each led by someone who could lead, someone bold and already proven. Despite this, their faces were wan and nervous, and their nerves shot by the call to arms, early- beyond early today. The sun was still not up, but the sky was beginning to glow anyhow. “SOLDIERS!” he yelled out. They had no coffee, no white tablets to wake them up or keep them going, after days on the march. Only a will to die, to fight, to live. That had to be enough, a will to challenge the supermen in their armored cars, to charge! “Soldiers, I must speak to you!” already the water-bearers, no more than children really, were streaming towards them, buckets for the horses, and soaked leather canteens for the men. One, a little child really, why was he out here, no more than fourteen, tugged at his saddle blanket. “Chief Joseph, we found wild onions! Maybe they will help wake you up!” He looked over, feeling hollow and leary, and saw that the kid had a bundle of green stalks and white bulbs in his hands. “Thank you boy” he said, trying to sound peppy. He grabbed one of the proffered stalks, and then gestured to the warriors. “Pass them out, eh?” and the kid ran off among the columns of prairie ponies. He bit into the pale orb of vegetable flesh, and immediately an explosion of hot sulfur erupted in his mouth, burning through his nose. “Fu-” he started. He wasn’t sure he actually felt more awake, but it sure had cleared his eyes out. He’d take it.

Soldiers, brothers and sisters, we are here because we care. We care for our land. We care for each other. We care for ourselves and our children. The Hun is here, on our land because he does not care. He despoils his own land and does not care for it. He does not care for his own children, so he takes us as slaves to feed them. He does not care for other Huns, so he comes out here. He does not care for himself for he comes here in so few of numbers. Brothers and Sisters- look how few there are, these men who have crossed the plains. Beyond their frontiers of concrete, there are as many Huns as there are grasses on the Steppe, but here there are not even fifty. We outnumber the Hun, six of us to every one of him. He has pride and faith in his box cars and their armor, so much that he discounts us, even though with our thrift and forethought we have accumulated many rockets, a single one of which could destroy his precious shelter. .. Many of us will die to destroy the Hun, but he will be destroyed. Not one will live to reach the far side of the plain. We will cut off their eyelids so that they can see their own folly and carelessness, and we will raise our children on stories of our heroic defense of our land on which the Hun so carelessly steps. We, today and here, will all do our duty to our land and our people, because we care, because we see the light of humanity in ourselves, and will not let those wolves with dead eyes hunt us. Let us ride!

And that was all he had to say. He felt his voice rasp from the yelling, and then, deciding that the half-hour was almost upon them, rode up to the little crest of hill. He pulled out the sighting-optic and gazed through it, the world ten times as big inside the tube as outside it. Smoke rose up across the waving grass, rising in a choking black column from not one or two, but all three of the armored machines, their tan metal skins scorched and pierced. Down below, in a ring, he could see the motley militia men firing their automatic rifles. They had formed a ring, so they couldn't be too inexperienced for all their impetuosity in coming here, but they now appeared a weak twenty men, even for their machine-guns. It was time to ride! He hoisted high his left arm, the gleaming inlaid copper spirals on the gray gunmetal, a signal to the men and women on horse behind him. Then he clenched his thighs and kicked back his heels, and the white pony "Lightening" dove down the little hill across the flat land. He held his fire, circling the horses with his legs and core as he rode around the distant ring, the columns of smoke and chatter of gunfire from the men in the grass. There was a weak point on one side of the ring, where the ragged group of men had neglected to place anyone, the perfect spot... he glanced over his shoulder and saw the band of horses and warriors circling behind him. He gestured with his gleaming rifle, and then kicked Lightning into the best gallop a steppeland pony could do, screaming a long wild animal scream as the distance between him and the ripping bolts of the machine-guns closed. Behind him, the same roar of fury and hate rose, fear of the guns sending it spiraling high into the sunlight of the morning air as the blue day began to brighten evermore. At forty paces he began to shoot, firing round after round at the circle of men who too late had seen the horse riders. Some tried to stand and fight, turning, lifting machine guns out of mounts or rising with pistols in hand. A shot whizzed past his head, and then another took off his brimmed black hat. He slid, hung off the side of his horse, firing the gun, once, click the action, again, click slide lock, fire, click slide lock, fire, the man went down, then Lightning stumbled and fell. He slid through the grass up against the burned back of one of the cars, glancing at the pony, a gaping red cave open at her breast, but already the pursuing riders were with him, and five columns of blazing wither rifle fire. Fifteen, maybe less than ten of the militia men were running. One sounded like he was sheltering in the burning metal, or maybe it was just bullets cooking off in the turret. Joseph took no chances.

He swung himself up onto the top of the hot metal vehicle, gun in hand, moving as fast as he could and swinging the barrel into the face of a dirty, sweaty, soot-stained farmer-soldier, and fired into the man's chest before the Hun could swing his short rifle around to face him. A bullet fragment clanged out, back against the turret armor of the wrecked machine, and a spray of red lung viscera splashed itself in a dazzle pattern against the sandy metal. Fuck you, his heart said, and he had to chastise himself. Then he clambered around the turret where the column of smoke rose, and began shooting over the heads of the riders who were streaming past at the fleeing band of ten, eight, seven, four, one. The whole group was gone.

After the action, they found a man in an officer's garb, a well dressed failure of a custodian of his men. A latin-reader looked at his papers, which allegedly read Thoma Kuester. Olga arrived with her razor knife, and pulled his eyelids down before cutting a thin slit across them and pulling them off. She spat on them. "Long may you see what you've done," she said. They had, miracle of all miracles, only taken fifteen wounded, and only three of those dead. Water-bearing children were already coming

down to take weapons and clothes, why let good boots go to waste out here? Any food supplies they could find, too. One of the cars had been totally burnt out, a rocket hitting the oil supply in the armored walls of that thing. Another had had its turret blown off. The last was hit, three or four times, on all sides. He wiped sweat and gunsmoke from his brow. He needed to find a river to bathe himself in.

He found the muddy creek bed with only a half foot of water in it right as the dry spell broke. Clouds, heavy with rain, were dashing themselves against the mountains back east, and even here they were piling up, spilling water down on the baked and thirsty land. He stripped himself naked as the pelting streams from heaven fell, washing the grime and bits of lung and sweat from him, cleaning his naked stomach and hairy groin. He splashed the sparkling river water which was gathering above the mud clotted rain water over himself, wetting his hair and his head and his penis, washing them for what might have been the first time in a week of hard riding and drought. The fresh clear water felt magnificent as it rolled across his skin. Had the first men to be baptized, riding out of the desert to a hide-bound preacher felt so refreshed? Perhaps there was some kind of restoring spirit in the motion after all. He rubbed the water, scrapping with his stub-nails against his neck and behind his ears, feeling the grime pull itself away, leaving fresh clean skin underneath.

Truthfully, he found it hard to hate the soldiers, especially now that they were dead. After the act, the passion cooled. He could only feel pity for them, lifeless rags of bodies left to rot and be eaten under the vast sky and coyote filled grassland. Not food fit for eagles even. Did they leave wives and children who might mourn them, lovers hidden away in some barracks? But thoughts like this helped stoke the hate back up, a blistering cold disdain, a desire to make them understand the pain of lives tossed away so carelessly out here. Could they ever be made to understand what they did, to see the light of a shared humanity? Could any number of victories of force, burned cars, dead husbands open their eyes? Or would they have to walk ten thousand miles with razor knives in hand, right to the marble steps of their gleaming white capitol dome built by slaves, slit their eyelids and leave them staring before they would dare to look at them as equal beings?

19: Shadows in Moonlight



Two filthy bandits, young enough to be children, and smelling like unwashed shit mixed with rotten fruit and foul tobacco stood on the gallows. Hans Ortelsburg stood, feeling the heat under the layers of starched cotton and stiff silk. He wiped his brow with a lace embroidered handkerchief, sent with love from Mrs. Ortelsburg back on her Baltic cruise. Evidently the patterned swastika was a traditional Fin design, but it didn't look so different from the one on the red, white, black flags that fluttered above the platform.

It was a bad business that they'd had to pay for an axe crew to come out here. It was still technically an illegal settlement on the Siberian reserve, although it was obviously in Europe, and the crypto-bolsheviks and christians in the East Bureau couldn't convince anyone it was off limits to the manifest destiny of the people. Of course that meant that he did have to pay out of pocket for state functions. Sometimes he could get the Army boys to take care of things for a minimal fee, as they were usually sympathetic to free soilers, but he was also trying to make everything seem very functional and civilized, and backyard hangings sat poorly with the journos in the capital. So, out of his own pocket the funds had come. It was just as well that he'd decided not to take the summer cruise with the wife, as this dreck was proving to be a real headache. A couple dirty fucking drifting cattle-rustling bandits riding around on horseback- there was only one thing for it. But then no one had been able to agree on who should do the deed, or how to do it. For a time, the boy-thing had claimed that the girl one was half german, a kidnap, and should be spared, and the girl, in equally dull tones of some incomprehensible driveling slav speak, denied it. If manumission hadn't been creeping up on them, he might have tried selling her in exchange for axe work, but times were what they were. No one was interested in paying tax for this either when they figured some tough cord and a barn door would do the job just fine. Fucking peasants, so stubborn. Not a worldly concern with the limitless promise supply of eastern land, breeding like rabbits and wasting the dirt. All the noise from the capitol, so clean and polished, about the soil and the blood- well, if only they had to do the tough work of bringing culture and civilization out here! Make a garden of this desert of grass, his ass.

That was his burden of course. He had been the one to put around satellite phone calls for a licensed executioner, and a drumhead tribunal of townsmen who could vote, that yes indeed a bunch of horse-thieving bandits talking about "helipoppers" were of ill-enough repute to be done in. Gone were the days where a handgun and a noodle behind a shed were enough- civilization was here, and almost too much of a headache to be worth it. He doubted it even mattered to this pair of thieving children, this "Marto" and "Lya" who could barely speak and smelt as foul as thieving coyotes. And yet- if it wasn't the civilized task of consensus, leadership, and cultured heritage which separated *men* from these animals, what was it? Surely, he supposed, standing upright is worth the headache. Such thoughts stirred in his head even as he lay down to escape this nightmare and awaken to the world of dreams.

Speckles of rain played a rhythm down on the nylon above Margarete's head. From the dull gray light, it could have been anytime after 5h, especially with the veil of clouds and trees mixing mist and shadow with light. She rolled over in the warm cotton bed-bag, careful to stay on the leather pad and off the damp tarpaulin of the tent floor. Isolde was still asleep, dreaming maybe, strange expressions of stormy anger and relaxation shimmering over her face. Further over still, Neele was curled into a horizontal ball. "Neele" she whispered "Neele, are you asleep?" For a moment, the tap of rain filled the tent again. Neele rolled over, with a big sigh. "For an hour now." "Has it been raining that long?" Margarete murmured. "It's very relaxing," Neele responded, and then rolled back over. Margarete thought back through the lessons of the previous day- the rain came from warm moist air being pushed up by cool dry air. The water came pushing in from the Atlantic, but out here at the edge of the Front

Range the mountains themselves physically forced them up, where they dropped off the water to stop from getting tired. She had loved looking at the map that Mrs. Grothman put up, the maze of arrows and colors showing the direction and force of the wind. That kind of thing might be really helpful to her father for planning his crop planting.

Lost in this reverie, reveille caught her by surprise. The bronzy blast of a bugle smashed through the soft pitter-patter of the rain, calling them all up. Ugh, was it hard to pull herself out of the warm comfort of the bag, into the slight chill and damp of the tent. Half in the cotton comfort, half in the fresh air, she reached towards the plastic locker at the end of the tent, rapidly pulled out an undershirt to slide over her chill arms, and then the butternut brown uniform, neatly unfolded it, the green armband with the white life-rune still on the shirt. She buttoned it quickly, the pale brown plastic sliding into the breathable fabric. It was still cool to the touch, but she knew that it would warm quickly. Then she pulled out the green denim skirt, and pulled them over her still ensconced legs. Finally, the long mixed fabric socks, sliding halfway up her calves. Isolde was moving slowly, still rubbing her eyes, while Neele was already attempting to lace up her long leather boots in the half-lee of the tent's rain cover. They each took their turn putting on the boots (after checking for any spiders that might have crawled in of course) and then dashed to the pine mess hall over the muddy brown-gray footpath. Her long blonde braids swung out behind her, strong boot treads gripping and slipping on the slick mud. "Concentrate on the breathing," she reminded herself, keeping a strong upright posture and firm, springing steps. The rain was lighter than the wet ground would suggest- maybe it had tapered off, maybe it was the trees, whatever the cause she was still dry when she reached the mess.

When they were at the base camp they didn't have to worry too much about cooking and cleaning, so she took her seat at her band's table. Mrs. Kallmeyer, the organic sciences teacher, was joining their table that morning. When Isolde arrived (completing the fourth alongside the three other tents- Ilse and Lisel and Traudl, Kathrine and Katja and Elfriede, Charlotte and Frieda and Helga) Kallmeyer made an announcement. Due to the rain, the Hagal group wouldn't be able to engage in the hay harvest planned for the morning; indeed the slick paths made the normal maintenance that they would have to do impractical or dangerous. Instead they would be doing their science and art hours now, and then see if the sun returned in the afternoon. They all tried to hide their un-German delight- working in the hay was hard and hot, and after it, classes always seemed like a treat. It was Freya's day, the end of a cycle (every now and then some professor in the capital tried to change it, but they had yet to succeed Mrs. Ruediger had told them) they would be finishing their Saxon Greeting, and the atmospheric science unit. Margarete was enthralled with Mrs. Grothman's descriptions of the towering cumulonimbus, shaped like Thor's anvil, and released lightning with heavy peals of thunder like strikes of Mjolnir. It showed that their forefathers, the natives of the land, had really understood stuff that only now science was showing. That was what they all agreed. Isolde, always a little indolent, said that it seemed like a literary coincidence, but she was from Riga, and always a little too contrary towards farm girls like her.

Breakfast, made by the 16 and 17 year olds of the Ger group, was bags of boiled egg, hot and homogenous and ready fast, along with slices of thick black bread. They usually needed the big meal to get through the harvest hours before the sun rose too

high, but she welcomed it. Any extra food was a chance to get taller than Leni, her older sister who still towered over her. Eggs and rye disappeared quickly into the ravenous mouths of the girls- hard work and regimented eating made every bite that much more valued for hungry youth. As soon as the tall glasses of milk (much chalkier tasting than she was used to on the farm) were drained, Olga and Adelheid the Odal-mothers of the group came to take them to the amphitheater for their new classes. The path that rose into the heights of the wooded hill was coated with gravel, making it much easier to move along than the ones leading to the campsites. The beech trees were full of their broad fish-shaped leaves, sheltering them from rain. They took care of the trees in their fall camp by clearing out the little pestilent brush below, and the trees took care of them in return. A very healthy and natural relationship, not at all like the big cities or plantations they had to take care of in the cradle-land and South. That, she pondered in a moment of reflection along the wandering-path, was probably why the East Girls Organization remained so vital and outdoorsy compared to the one in the west where they focused only on reading old books and counting money from bake-sales.

The amphitheater was high on the hill, of course, like all of the ones in any German place. It was the cultural heart of community events and elections, a place for the young and able. After all, if you couldn't climb a hill, why should you listen to a recital of Schiller or von Stauffenberg, let alone vote? It only made sense. A huge green tarp was pulled across the construction, big logs of beech and mountains of dirt that the LGG had carved out for fifty years. Every so often, the land-duty would turn to restoring part of it, keeping it young and vital. They began warming up the routine with the large leather balls, tossing and catching them over and over again, dancing and weaving around in a large circle. This was the Hagal group's first year with the Saxon, so it was rough- Margarete had dropped the ball herself a couple of times earlier on. Isolde, *of course*, was perfect. Back in the cities they probably started the young girl's league with the Saxon, unlike out here where it was understood that a woman should value her chastity. Not that the Saxon greeting was that untoward- it was a cornerstone of German culture of course! but all the same, it did show a woman's legs off. Of course when she was a little girl herself she would have loved to learn it with Leni, but now she could see why they waited out here. If her little brothers were girls, she wouldn't have wanted them to be dancing like Isolde.

Weather science came and went, this time more of a story about how the government was carefully controlling the oil supply to make sure that Siberia would warm slowly to fit their race, not so fast as to damage the countryside. Sure, that was smart, but she wouldn't have minded a little more going to tractors so they could spend less time cutting hay! By the time that Olga and Adelheid came to bring them back to the mess hall, the sun had warmed the air and pushed out most of the clouds- well the bits that hadn't rained on their heads! The older girls asked how the gymnastic routine was going, and said they remembered learning it very well. They were learning musical techniques- not just how to play, but also how to make them. It would be hard to entertain a farm-family if they couldn't make music after all! Isolde mentioned that back in Riga they did Piano and string instrument lessons in school, and if she would have to learn it again out here when that time came. Olga chucked her on the head and said that they would stick together as a group regardless, which made Margarete smile. The spartan lunch of apples, nuts, and poultry on rye passed quickly, with Mrs. Kallmeyer noting that the sky had cleared and they would be off to the fields in the afternoon. Then they were down on the road, already drying into the

dusty gray crust, walking to the bus station. Today they were told that Mr. Riesch had enough hay, so they'd be doing something with Mulzer's fields. Unlike most of the farmers, Mulzer was trying to grow herbal medicines in a dry and gulch filled area unfit for the cattle that dominated the landscape. Margarete was skeptical of herbal medicines compared to the miraculous white tablets that got shipped out from the cities, but they smelled nice.

Bouncing along on hard polymer seats down the bumpy gravel roads in the bus was not so nice. The big bus ground to a stop, kicking up dust and gravel along the gulch. A long neatly groomed driveway to the left, lined with a long row of short trees that stretched into the distance. On the right, a gulch, mostly dry even after the morning's rain, with a sign indicating a quarry somewhere further down. A severe looking man in a very dusty field gray dress was waiting for them at the end of the drive. His sunburnt face remained implacable even as the hail of gravel rocketed past. Directed by the older girls, their squadrons troupe out, soldiers for the fields to be addressed by their commanding officer. Mulzer, an old veteran, offered them a high handed salute (a respectful gesture, fit for any German, even a woman) and then introduced them to the land with long sweeps of his arm. "I received my homestead as compensation for my long years of service. It's about 80 acres, give or take, stretched out along the gullies at the edge of the road. Good land, but hard- too hard for the soft cattle that sell in the cities these days. So, I thought back to my grandfather's place, a great big sweeping place on the sea, where the lavender bloomed. I wanted to bring that here, to this rugged land." He flashed a smile out to the assembled girls, a smile that almost seemed sad. "This land gets cold, too cold for the lavender that grew by the sea, but through extensive breeding work with students at Hohenheim, Montpellier, and Lebenstedt I think I've found something that'll work here. Problem is, I've got a lot of land that needs to be terraced. Now I'd borrow the slaves of my grandfather, but with Manumission slated, and an eye towards helping the youth, I've decided to ask Camp Gunnhild for help!" His smile seemed tight-lipped, and after seeing that she wondered if he was one of the ones who thought that keeping the slaves on the farms was the way to uplift them to German culture, instead of respecting them by leaving them to live free in their siberian huts (at least until the weather improved there). Of course, the rusty dusty shovels with well worn handles he started handing out were not endearing either. After he took the Odal-groups aside to brief them with a map (Oh! To be so responsible as Leni and the rest of them!) squads of the Hagal and Ger groups broke up, with the older girls handling the brick work and the younger girls digging out the soil, and of course, all directed by the Odal-group girls. Fortunately, they kept the Odal-group girls with their usual squads, meaning that Olga and Adelheid were there.

Adelheid was the taller of the two, long blonde hair, blue eyes, and a narrow smile for the younger girls. She seemed less sure than Olga, who moved to command respect and admiration despite her curly brown hair. She always had a wide smile for a good idea and a quick smack for someone who was out of line. Her eyes were rolling as she handed out shovels- like a good leader, she was never afraid to voice her opinion, which was "what an old coot, to bring us out here to dig his ditches. What will you learn from digging?" and yet also quick to ensure that the groups followed her obediently, no sorcerer's apprentice of dissent, adding "still, it will be useful for the landscape, and besides the Ger-girls can always find something that would need masonry in a little town or farmstead." Adelheid smiled and tried to reassure them that the shoveling wouldn't be everything they feared, "we had to do lots of digging projects too, you know, especially with the old amphitheater. It's not so bad." "And

anyway, you *are* young and vital,” Olga added. They made sure all the younger girls had a sun hat and a bottle of water, and then led them out towards the part of the gulch they would be terracing. Jutta and Sabine, the other pair of Odal-girls were directing the Ger-squad to gently balance wheelbarrows full of bricks and cement. They moved down the road along towards the quarry, drifting closer and closer to the edge of the gulch under the passing day, which seemed to be getting hotter, not cooler.

As it turned out, the first few mouthfuls of soil that the rusty steel of the shovel took were not so bad at all. It was actually encouraging to see how fast and how smooth the shovel cut through the dirt, which was that perfect consistency mixed with a little rain to hold firm and yet be soft. The walls her shovel left alongside the slope already formed a beautiful little wall of straight ridges, a perfect terrace already! Soon enough, she felt damp sweat on her forehead and arms, and her gaze turned from the growing row of shovel-bites towards the distant point where Neele had started cutting into the dirt. Just as she was starting to flag, Neele broke out into song, singing “Raise the Flag,” a classic patriotic hymn. Isolde stopped digging and shot out a straight and high salute while Neele was warming up into the second verse, but of course no one else did. Why salute a song that was helping build a rhythm into this back-aching interminable 40 minutes in the desert? She knew the rhythm at least, and hummed along to it. Neele’s singing *was* a *little* obnoxious, but Isolde seemed to be flustered and was still standing to attention. She felt more into the work moving along with the song, and the soreness of her arms and back seemed less serious. As Neele finished the hymn, Margarete had a terrible idea- she broke out the Germany Song, the national hymn, with all five stanzas. Isolde shot her a thunderously angry glare as she continued to stand stock still, arm flung out high in defiance. Surely saluting the anthem wasn’t such a big thing as all this even back in the cities? How on earth could it be more patriotic to abandon duties to improve the country in order to make a silly pious prayer?

After about an hour they were all slowing down, having worn themselves out early and fast, Olga and Adelheid sent a couple of the Ger-girls to fill the wheelbarrows with fresh water and dried meat strips. Restored a little by the short break and the snack, they got back to work, at a much more leisurely and consistent pace. After another hour and half, spread out among water-breaks and chanting songs, and five minutes of sitting down, the upper terrace line had been dug out. A two foot vertical lay across, with all the extra gray-brown dirt piled above the cut. The soil was almost loose from the rain, speckled with chips of rock and gravel. With the cut finished, the Odal-girls instructed them to start hauling the cinder-blocks and bricks and bags of concrete down to help the Ger-girls mason up the terrace. They all groaned, and moved slowly, but led by Neele, still humming various patriotic songs in a loop, they got down to it. For all of Isolde’s grandstanding, she had caught up in the digging, and Margarete noticed that she was working hard and fast. She prided herself on still being faster than Isolde, and so they spurred each other on in that fashion. At one point she looked up into the sky and was shocked to see how little the sun had moved, still floating high in the air. The next eternity of moving bricks down (for Pauuala, the Ger-girl she was working for) passed much faster, and the sun seemed to have sunk substantially towards the wide western rim of the sky. Before she knew it, her tired legs and arms were folding into the plastic bus seat, and the jouncing jolting gravel road was rocking her to sleep as gently as her mother once had.

They woke up back at the camp's trailhead, marched in slow motion back to their tents, and then started beating the dust out of their uniforms to prepare for the evening ceremonies. Another Freya's day was here. They stopped for an early evening cup of apple cider and salted almonds, followed by plates of potatoes and sausage. For a little while they mulled around, making tired small talk about Mulzer, and if he had any sons their age, and how nice the lavender would smell once it was growing behind the impressive red-brick walls they had put up. In previous years, Leni had told her that in the late afternoons they would go down to the river to swim and wash in the cold clear water, but apparently an oil pipe had burst to the north (the result of some savage Reds they had been told!) poisoning the living river. The imagined that a similar camp of the HJ up north were working to clean the river, imagined blonde shirtless men with muscles and smooth chests working hard to clean the river so that they could bathe in it again, maybe even come floating by down the river to serenade them... obnoxious of course. But with the river in the state it was, she and Neele decided to wander through the woods, clear brush and maybe collect firewood or find some buried Tsarist jewelry out in the woods. As they were striking out Isolde glanced towards them and ran after, asking if she could tag along. Margarete shrugged, but Neele told her that "of course" she could. Isolde laughed again, and so she smacked her like she'd smack her brother Freddy when he didn't do the chores. It was unseemly to laugh at misfortune, especially hers, she felt.

Isolde didn't sit there and wait to be smacked however. She lunged towards Margarete's stomach, and even though she had several inches and pounds on the dark haired city girl, she tumbled over backwards. She grabbed Isolde's hair, a soft clump of locks and pulled her up to sock her on the jaw. She and Leni never fought, at least not like this, but she had seen her brothers fight, and she swung her fist the way they did. Isolde went tumbling over, but folded her knees and hips up as she did, locking Margarete's waist and lower back under a tight leg cross. Margarete lifted her elbow back to smash the city girl's short little nose, but before she could bring it forward, Isolde grabbed her other arm, twisted her, legs, and before either could unblink their eyes, Margarete found a leg over her throat, another over her chest, and her left arm pulled out straight straining against the elbow joint in Isolde's tight grasp. The pain was great and growing, and it was only brute instinct and a will to beat this presumptuous little bitch that let her ignore the pain, roll her core up and forward against the other girls legs, jam that captured elbow into her stomach all in an lightning fast move of anger, jam her other arm against Isolde's throat. Neele's boot swung into her ribs, not lightly, but not harshly either. "Get the fuck up you two" she whispered "we don't want Olga to find us up here off the trail fighting." That brought Margarete up and then to her knees. Isolde rolled up quickly, anger flashing in her eyes. "I almost had you, you big farm animal." Margarete snapped back "but you didn't, did you? Your silly cosmopolitan city martial arts couldn't stop even an animal like me." She smiled bitterly. Neele shot them both a contemptuous look. "Both of you are going to have to wash your uniforms now. Luckily I know a good spring to do that at." A trump card and decisive victory. Despite the soreness nursed in her elbow, she almost felt respect for Isolde. The city girl had fought back surprisingly hard.

After a couple minutes trudging through the leaf-litter and mixed woods, along what almost might have been a path, Margarete suddenly remembered the first summer after Leni returned. They had still been living in their two story house near Himmelsdorf-am-Donn then, and mother had still been alive. Leni had come in on the last train of the day, but the combination of bright moonlight casting strange shadows

around the sister's lonely room and the excitement of seeing her big sister had kept her from sleep. Her big sister and her mother had gotten back from the station, and they were talking. Mother had been in one of the first groups out there, she said, and was curious to see if the old amphitheater seats she had helped build as a girl were still there, and what it was like now that they had the green uniforms and the runes of the East LGG instead of the blue and eagles that had covered everything when she was a girl. They also talked about a hidden hot spring, off a small path from the camps where girls would go in the moonlit nights. She wondered if Neele, who like her was a girl from the East country, had heard the same stories. Isolde, a city girl, probably had never seen woods like this, she was thinking to herself when her foot crashed through a rotting branch under the leaf cover and she found herself falling.

She wound up catching her chin on some hidden branches, staining her green and khaki uniform with last year's moldering leaves. Her jaw and left cheek hurt, her elbow was scrapped, and her shins speckled with the bloody evidence of what lay beneath the soft leaves. She pushed herself up, quickly wiped her face to hide any tears of shock and pain with a gesture meant to clean off any leaves stuck there. Isolde left out an ugly sharp laugh, but Neele helped her up. "I'm good to go on" she started "so long as I can wash the stains out before the evening ceremony." Neele checked her wristwatch, a leather band over the back of her hand. "It's only 18h, we'll have plenty of time, if you're really OK" Neele said. Isolde chortled again. Margarete nodded defiantly.

Trees filtered bloody red light into dancing shadows, no doubt refracted by the waves of smoke from the annual Siberian fires, in long lines between the trees. Rows of torches, steel poles with bitumen soaked heads, flickering in the half light, lined the long path towards the amphitheater. The girls, uniform, lockstep, marching boots, half-length forest green skirts, spotless tan uniforms, marked with the white runes on the green armbands, trailed towards the East, a marching snake of youth curling into the rows of hewn stone and timber and earth, rows of seats for giants. They formed a great looping semicircle of girls, shortest at the far back, tallest towards the front, standing, arms outstretched in the roman salute. As the sunlight darkened to a bruised purple haze, one last one came, running like the champion at the Olympiad in the capitol with a flaming torch in hand. This was Leni, long blonde hair held back in a ponytail, pounding steps in time with the trumpeter who sounded off the Song of the Germans as the black-red-white swastika was lowered on the post. Leni plunged the torch into the pyramid of wood on the left and then its twin on the right. Two jets of flame, fuelled by dry brush and cracked gas shot into the sky, illuminating the newly born night. The banner was folded gently, then as at the end of every week, placed in the fire to be replaced with a fresh new banner. This was the cult of youth; this is what it meant to be the flag raised high over the vast country, *their* country. The ritual finished, the girls took a seat. This time, it was a squad of the Ger-girls who came out to perform. They recited lines from one of the great National poets, then leapt off into telling stories of camp lore, cracking jokes, raising raucous applause and peals of young laughter.

The weekly bonfires were impressive- and intimidating. Every performance Magarete saw, she felt more concerned about what they would do when their turn came in the final weeks when each squad of four tents would have to put on a performance. Their whole group was laughing at the jokes and skits, imaging ridiculous performances they could put on, Ilse wondering if they could get

instruments, Katja wondering if they could put a Dutch pan-german twist on it, Frieda imaging a pagan summer ritual, all trying to figure out how to make terrible jokes funny for girls three years older than them. "Well, couldn't we do a variation on the Saxon Greeting?" Margarete proposed, "like our own twist on it after the whole group one we do? Maybe work the different ideas into that?" Isolde looked at her, surprised, and then surprised her- "I like Margarete's idea!" The moment of goodwill only lasted a moment, washed away in the city girl's stream of suggestions about how to improve it, and what they might be able to do.

Lying down in her warm cotton bag later, tired and on the verge of sleep after the long day, it struck Margarete somewhat guiltily that she was being unfair to Isolde. The gnawing in her gut of guilt lasted only half a heartbeat as she descended into the depths of sleep however. Down there, in the cavernous recesses of the unconscious mind, strange things lurked.

Moonlight filtered through the black leaves of the trees as she strode along the path they had discovered that afternoon, making the forest floor appear frozen in ice, still crackling under her feet. They were out there, all twelve of them, somewhere behind or in front of her, all chattering. Occasionally Olga's piercing voice directed them one way or another, the laughing band of girls stripped down to their nightclothes prancing through the shadows and moonlight. Strange sounds seemed to spread through the woods, chattering animals where there had been none from fear of gas and guns and mosquito killer for a generation, smokey shadows hiding lurking bears and wolves, squirrels plotting and mocking high on the tree branches, planning caches of food for the winter campaign. In this raucous eerie half-life of the forest's dead, Margarete did not hear the spring until she was already at it, hearing the last command of Olga's booming voice- break off all of us, strip down and bathe in the warm waters. She was the first back to the spring-pool, two layers of cotton night-dress neatly folded on top of a nearby boulder. Figuring the other girls to be slightly delayed, she dipped herself in the hot mineral water, feeling great relief on her sore muscles. As the steam, flush with the scent of sulfur and salt hit her face in the chill of the night, thought flooded her mind. What was she doing out here? Where was everyone? How had they decided to do a midnight run to the spring? Amidst the steam of the water, the overwhelming silence of the wood rose to a crescendo. There were no animals on this hill, there were no chattering girls, no booming maternal Olga there, only silence. Was she alone? She opened her voice to call out, to scream, to ask "where are you? Neele, where are you?" but as the warm rich air entered her mouth, flowed into her lungs, she saw figures glimmering in the light of the half-moon, through the steam across the spring.

Nude figures, covered with long wet air that glimmered white in the frosty light and smoky steam. "Katja?" she guessed. How silly, how immature she had been, like an infant to have doubted, to have feared! There was no response. She leaned against the smooth rock sides of the pool, catching only glimmers of the other girl, then other girl only, in the midst. She pushed off on her legs, swimming, like she had done in the Donn reservoir, heading towards the girl. She gasped when the figure turned, a curled and shrunken back giving way and revealing a face as old as the hill, as old as a rotting tree. The nose was long and waxy and leering, jutting far out towards her own face, disgusting and dripping with fumes. Yellow eyes glimmered behind dark cavernous brows. That nose sucked steam in greedily, filling a sagging and ancient breast far behind it. In a voice of creaking boards in a blizzard, of the grass wilting

before a fire on the plains, the steam spoke the words for the crone. "I do not smell a Russian scent here. What are you doing in these lands, girlie?" There was something wavering in that voice, like a cat playing at being lame in the street. "What do they call you, not-russian child? You can tell your grandmother" At this Margarete swung out a flat hand rapidly, this Jewish thing, this mist-bolshevik, was not her grandmother. There had not been Russians on this side of the mountains in a generation. The hand, which should have flipped the crone over, slid only through mist, missing that crocodile's nose entirely. "If you will not talk to me, you must talk to my sister" the crone crooned, "how else will you find your way back?" and she extended a hand as long and white and waxy as the nose, jutting it into the steam and shadow towards the far end of the pool.

There a figure, identical, white wet hair and a back cast in silver by the steam and moonlight appeared even as the bent crone faded into swirls of silver mist swirling in the dark. When Margarete approached this one, it turned around, revealing another leering crone, waxy and bulging nose, an ancient withered body. This one smelled of meat-rot, and her mouth was the color of the night sky, gleaming yellow teeth flecked with stains and splotches of what could only be blood above a bulging stomach. "Ahhhh, little girl, little girl" the voice of boulders rasped. "I smell no russian-scent here, though your father must be half Ukrainian" What a vile thing to say! She balled a fist, the implication that her father was a mongrel, wasn't a civilized man, was a.... But she paused. She needed to find the other girls. What was she doing? Where was she? Where were they? She looked at the yellow glisten in the eyes. This must be a dream. She plunged her face into the swirling pool of water. For half a second she imagined a hand like a vice-grip of ice seizing her neck, her braids, holding her face in the hot water, plunging her downward. Then she jerked up, fully awake, alone and naked in the pool in the heart of the night, alone except the eerie half-moon. She rubbed her face, her shoulders, let her body sink into the warmth of the water to dispel the chill of the nightmare. Witches like that couldn't be real. Things like that might have been familiar to the Russians, but they had been wiped out by the spread of civilization, reason, thought!

Warmed from the pool, dried by rubbing herself down rapidly, cloaked again with her double nightshirts, she made her way back in the direction (she hoped! She prayed!) of the camp. She took slow steps for the first twenty paces, but there seemed to be evil yellow glints and giant moving trees in the dark. Her gut worried, asking if there was a witch, if she had been pulled back in time to the age of the Asiatic tsars and bolsheviks and cannibal peasants and bandit jews, away from her sister and her home. Her pace quickened and then burst into a run. She was dispelling these notions of moonshine and fear in the pulse and pound of her legs and bare feet over the forest ground when she recognized the spot where she had stumbled earlier. How relieving it was to see where she had left a humiliating impression before! Just as she thought that, the ground gave out beneath her, inhaled her into a cavern, fell away down into a blackness deeper than the night.

Inches of loam and leaves stained her night-dress cotton white into a black shadow. The only light was a foot and a half of silver light that peered over the edge of the hole. Around her the scent of wetness and limey air sat heavy. For all she could see, walls of stone enclosed her an inch outside of the circle of moonlight. Now she called out, screaming for her sister, for Neele, for Olga, for anyone who could hear her. Sound boomed and echoed around her, more distant than she had feared, but the

largeness of the space in the darkness was not comforting. She imagined herself alone on a stage, under the spotlight of the moon, surrounded by an audience of women with hungry yellow eyes, just like the pair that had appeared there, oh Freya provide succor, oh Tyr protect, oh! She screamed again, screamed some more, but no one came. She felt her voice growing hoarse and giving out. The moon was slowly tilting further up, illuminating more directly down the hole, and she shifted occasionally to keep up with it. What would happen if her body fell out of the light, maybe further into some deeper hole? What if the yellow eyes returned? She felt powerful pulses of blood and hot breath forming mist in the cool air of the pit and the glow of the moon. Then, suddenly, the light vanished, blocked out, erased from the sky. High above her she heard a voice: "Grete? Are you down there?" The high flat nasal tones were unmistakable- a coastal baltic accent, of all her saviors, it had to be Isolde! But Isolde! She was saved! No apparition could block out the moon! "Isolde! Isolde! I'm down here! Can you fetch me rope to climb out?" Her voice was hoarse and faint, not so much more than a whisper. Winds of desperation, eddies of subterranean air that could have strangled her so easily instead amplified her voice, wafting it towards that sweet exit. "Margarete! It is you! I will run to get rope! Wait right there!"

The shade vanished and the glare of the moon returned. She felt hot wet tears pour out again, this time not in fear or panic or pain, but instead of sweet relief for this saving grace. Only a couple of minutes passed before she heard footsteps returning, quiet on the leaf litter, but clear as crystal in the silence punctuated only by her ragged breath. "Don't worry Margarete, I'm tying the rope to a tree, and then I'll throw it down to you" Isolde called out. Sure enough, the long rope came flying down into the hole a minute later. It was a thick brown rope, big sasparilla and hemp fibers that sparkled when a stray caught the moonlight. It felt rough and hard in her hand. She started to pull herself up when the moonlight vanished, blocked once more by Isolde's shade. It was hard and slow going- she felt only half a foot off the ground, and already her arms were burning. Isolde called down "Use your knees! Grab the rope between your knees in between pulls Grete!" Margarete heard that name for a second time. It was strange to her ears, but if anyone had a right to that, it was now Isolde. "Alright, alright, Isolde, but please move so I can see my hands!" she called back, hoping that her raspy voice didn't hint at the panic inside her. Isolde moved back; the light returned; hand over hand and knee clench after knee clench passed. A big sliver of sasparilla worked itself into her thumb, like a long brown worm under the skin, another burning sensation on top of the flames in her arm and chest. This was much worse than bringing her father's mules out for watering. This was worse than she had ever felt. It was an achingly slow ascent, hanging like a spider, limbs and fingers burning and bleeding, dangling like a spider on a thread in the growing moonlight, slowly pulling herself out of the darkness.

She reached the lip of the hole, the shattered white stone topped with thick layers of loam and leaves, out into what had once seemed a dark and shadowy forest, but now seemed ablaze in the moon. She told Isolde that she must have dream-walked to the spring, and on the way back the ground where they had fought gave way. Isolde marveled that she was unhurt, and Margarete marveled that Isolde had heard her. She even hugged her. Back in her tent, wet and dirty nightshirts hung on the rain-cover to dry, she curled into the chill cotton bag and shivered to warm it. She thanked Isolde again, and then again, and then complimented her for the rope, and then they both faded into the late night. She would have quite the story to tell her father and brothers when she returned from the camp to their new little homestead!

Sometime in the hours before the sun washed out the moon from the sky, deep under the cover of the shadows of forest boughs and innocent dreams, the crone slunk back in, a waxy and half-molten creature dropping from a hut that seemed perched high in the woods, slipping through the bottom of the tent door which was unzipped, folding her body over Margarete's, fetid and rotting breath filling the air. Margarete could feel her weight slinking over the cotton bag, smell the hot scent, and then, though she was buried at the bottom of the bag, with the top closed, that great snout, at once wolfish and crocodilian snuck in, smelling her out. She felt the top of the bag sealed by vice-grip hands, felt the bag begin to rise- and then the bark of a dog brought her to her senses, wrapped safely and snugly in her bag, sheltered by the companionship of snoring Isolde and Neele, safe and secure from the creatures of the past which receded even as dreams under the light of dawn.

20: All the Things That Are Done Under the Sun



In the prairie tent, listening to the little snores of the boys, sleep came slowly and fitfully, and the dream brought no reprieve. A thick stone basin of black granite, edges hewn rough like curved fangs of obsidian steamed hot over the pale clavicles of the face of beauty gazing at him. A hand, dripping clear water, raised itself up, soaking the long hair, the noble, slightly aged face. Another hand raised from the warm water, and gestured to a serving girl to bring a robe. The girl moved swiftly and precisely, and as the noblewoman rose, she was draped with the thick wool and rubbed down. Despite the precision and speed, the hem of the wool robe dipped into the bath, briefly. A grimace passed on the face of the Countess. The servant hurried to move the lady away, move her to the chambers away from the scene of the crime.

Hours passed, wandering behind the couple down endless labyrinthine mazes of dark stone corridors under flickering torchlight. Like a flash of lightning as the soaked robe hem hit the calf of the lady, she turned and struck the young girl- the child- on the back of her shawl and forced her down a passage into a chamber. Inside, a man and two women waited, iron chains in the hands of the women, and a wooden stave in the hands of the man. Smoke and flickers of orange torchlight turned the room into a bruised mass of blood-orange granite and black shadow. The servant was strung up on the wall with the cruel iron chains, and the man passed the stave to the Countess.

The first blow smashed the nose and lips of the youngling, splattering drops of blood along the oaken length. The second doubled the body over with its force to the gut, and the child woke with a cry, fear twisting in her eyes. Five blows, ten blows, the orange light dancing over the blood and bruising in the young body. After fifteen minutes of calculated fury applied in through the wooden implement, the stave was passed to one of the other women, and a brief hand gesture indicated that the beating was to continue. The most striking thing, in the dream, was the silence. No screams of anger, invectives, or explanation of the crime, only the slam of beats and the sounds of the victim, almost soft like the neighs and whinnies of the steppe cavalry sleeping under the dim light of a waxing first quarter outside.

The sun beat down on his hat, uncomfortably hot, as he stamped his thick rubber soles through the sage plot. Red-brown soil crumbled and cracked in the draining heat forming little cairns all around the pale green-gray plants. With every bootstep the sage crackled and shattered, dry bones. It still had its distinctive scent, effervescent swirls of herb rising up with each destructive imprint. The field seemed to stretch on forever, pale ghosts of plants, row after row of the heady smell of sage without interruption. The black composite gun, full of heavy brass and lead, sat in his sweating arms, step after step. The monotony brought his head down. Patrol or no patrol there was nothing here still alive. It was in this state of boredom and almost feverish heat that he walked into the burnt tractor. A metal bar struck his shin hard, threatening to tear the heavy cloth and shred the skin beneath, but in the end simply bruised. Steel, blackened with soot and stained with traces of red paint, sat like a rusting craggy pile of rock. Where there was a tractor, there was bound to have been a person; where there had been a person, there was bound to have been a house. He looked up and scanned the sun-kissed horizon. Against the flatness of the ground and the sunny blue vastness above, it should have been obvious if there was anything besides dry sage here.

Suddenly alert and aware, pieces of information began to drift through the haze of heat, planting themselves on the surface of his brain. The first was the silence. Back home along the streets of Dresden, beneath the cathedral spires, he would have been basking in the shade of linden trees, listening to the stirrings of cicadas in the warmth. But there were no insects here in the hot flat plain. Just silence. Far above,

in the vast blue, a black speck seemed to circle in the suddenly ominous silence. He turned around, checking behind him, and then he saw black char, a low pit of darkness amongst the eerie stillness of the field. He reached his gloved hand for the radio strapped to his chest. The plastic was hot, maybe too hot for the battery. Whatever the reason the thing made no sound when he cycled channels. He removed it, inspected the dials and buttons, tapped it, then hit it with the palm. No disturbance of static or voice to the silence of the field, which felt eerier and eerier. This wouldn't be the first time the shitty batteries failed, but it was never good. Fuck it. He started moving towards the grim remains. As he trudged through the dry earth and stiff sage, a different smell started to seep into his consciousness.

Burned pine, the cheap and ubiquitous stuff of homesteads beyond the eastbinding river, had its own odor, somewhere between fresh evergreen and thick woodsmoke. Here there was something else mixing its smell with the charred wood, sickly sweet and thick. It was a smell he recognized, recurrent whenever the long patrols had stumbled into a town or outpost after the bandits and indianers. It was his duty to inspect and confirm though, so kept stomping closer. Lots of these guys who were bold or desperate enough to try and transplant the grain of Goethe into the Outer East were nutty, but not so nutty that they didn't have panic bunkers. Not that it did them much good, but occasionally some kids would make it through a raid hidden away. Kids were resilient- even after clearing an encampment of the Reds there'd always be some mewling sound, and there was no way those tents had panic shelters. His pace quickened. It felt good helping children- and always better to be able to bring a good German kid back to their family in the west than to grant a final mercy to the little things the bandits hid in skin tents.

It was obvious there was no one to rescue here. The panic room was more like a closet sticking out of the remains of a wall, a steel door spilled open.

The radio-gps had started working again, so he made the report to BriCom and waited for instructions.

Oberpanzerpionier Wolfgang Lange, report 7.14.76 14:55:38, quadrant 'Fox', grid point 52.01344,39.50013. Burned farm equipment and accommodation present. Three recently deceased people, two male children, one male adult estimated 2-3 days dead from scavenging. Brutal manner of deceasedence indicates indianer massacre. Proceeding to look for traces of the attackers. Request squad support.

The dispatch was confirmed as received, and as long as there wasn't some blooming crisis along another ravine, he'd probably get at least the squad but maybe a whole platoon inside two hours. Until then, he'd busy himself looking intently for some shade to nap in. Odds were, they'd find a hot trail leading to the south and have to spend the night on the road.

He meandered down to the creek, hoping to find something for shade. The trees along creeks were just too tempting a source of wood for most homesteads to pass up, and this was no different. The soil was covered with scrubby grasses and bleached stumps which speckled the ground like an illness. Even without the trees, there were enough midsize hedges that he could stretch out and relax. The gurgling of the creek hinted that with more shade the air might have been cool and fresh, but it still felt hot and still. Rushing water also helped hide the silence- there still seemed to be no

animal sounds, no buzzing insects or chittering rodents. He drifted off to sleep on a bed of grass, undisturbed by ants or flies, warmed by the light of the golden sun.

A few hours must have been whiled away senselessly, because he woke up to a thick rubber boot poking his ribs. "Lange, get up. Come on man. Up." This was followed by a particularly sharp kick to his side. Groaning, he sat himself up. "Fuck you, Klein. I'm getting up" The other man offered out a thick hand and pulled him up. "Schaefer, Krause, and Mueller are fucking around at the house. Looked bad there- I think the kids got their throats cut open from all the bloodstain." Lange nodded. "Grim." They started walking back to the criminal scene. "Schwarz and Schulz are bringing around a truck, they just have to get gas from the depot first. Don't want to chance getting empty out here." Lange nodded. "Got a vulture circling around, looks like it was that or some transient wolf that roughed 'em up. They're still mostly there though, can't have been too long. Probably be able to catch 'em if they're lazing around." This time it was Kleins turn to nod. "Won't feel too bad about letting these ones get roughed up- just a couple animals really. Just need to find the big rat's nest of them and smoke it out. They'll run for the hills." Lange nodded back, but something about this one 'felt' different. There had been a heavy knot in his stomach ever since he had been dispatched down the ancillary valley to comb the rich smelling sage. The brigades were out, far out, and they had to keep scattering down these side valleys to make sure there weren't some Reds with Indian RPG's waiting for armor to roll by nonchalantly. Pain in the ass for sure, all this walking to save gas.

When they reached the others, Mueller was leaning against one of the posts, puffing on a nicotine vaporizer, glowing orange "ember" and heady clouds of lemony drug. Klein snapped his fingers aggressively. "Mueller, this is a scene of the dead!" Mueller shrugged. "They don't mind." Klein obviously did, and although he remained silent, Lange sympathized. Everyone had to try and remember what life outside the brigade was like, try to remain attached to civilization in some way. More of the lemon-scented vapor drifted towards him. "Wolfgang, you seen any evidence of a trail?" Schaefer asked. Lange thumbed behind him. "The tractor's back that way. The closer river bed's got no disturbance, just the usual logging. I'd start at the west creek, and work south." Schaefer nodded.

Krause, younger than the others, was hovering in the background, staring at the westward sinking sun. Lange spoke out. "Don't worry Krause, we'll get 'em back for this." The young curly-headed man, gray and beige dapple jacket washed out in the golden hour light remained tight lipped, facing away. Mueller chuckled. "He's experiencing a moment of doubt, Wolfie. Let him be. He's wondering if he's up to the duty of civilized man to his people." He had a nasty sneer under his graying mustache, fading in and out of clarity behind the fumes. Schaefer looked up towards the northern sky. "Listen." They did. The sound of an engine was there. They all turned and looked out. Sure enough a lone vehicle was crossing the plain. A big halftrack was heading towards them, tan-gray paint over the ceramics. The front was emblazoned with Schwarz and Schulz's usual humor, a striking double S symbol, a little more gothic than the runes that the allgemeine flew. He knew that some people found it disrespectful, either unearned or edgy, but the 'technical specialists' who drove and maintained the squad's vehicle found it powerful, powerfully funny. "Maybe they brought food too," he said hopefully. That might rouse Krause. Klein looked over "I'm sure they've got a little armored chocolate if nothing else" he said.

Over the great steppe lands against the unlimited blue expanse, the sun was like a blood orange, gold peel slowly shaving away and revealing the dark ruby blood beneath. Schwarz and Schulz stepped out of the cab into the reddening light. Behind their helmets and goggles they were indistinguishable. "What's up you fucks?" one of them asked. "Took you pricks long enough to get here" grumbled Mueller. Then he burst out a charming smile. "Bring us any food?" They laughed. "Food is for the camps, *landser*, but we did bring you bums chocolate!" Underneath the silver foil wrappings, carelessly discarded in the dusky clouds of sage, the bitter caffeine rich chocolate sat like a chunk of obsidian. The black diamond seemed even darker against the dying light, but inside his mouth flooded with saliva. One of the drivers turned, revealing the midnight nine of Spades painted on the back of his helmet. "Schulz! Got any water to go with this? I don't trust the Reds not to drunk-piss vodka all over these crystal streams" Schulz nodded, grabbed a metal can, and tossed it his way. Schwarz nodded. "Coffeewater, but we have 15 gallons of the normal shit too. Alright, someone put their dick away and pull out a map instead, eh?" Klein obliged on half the request, but the thick cylinder that was filling his hand flicked out only a bright ray of light, illuminating the map against the pale purples and washed out topaz of the horizon.

Thirty-three minutes later and his head already felt swollen and angry. Too much caffeine, followed by a good banging around in this loud tin drum that reeked of diesel. He and Mueller were passing the nico-stick back and forth, although truth be told that wasn't making his head spin any less. At least it helped with his stomach. Suddenly the wagon stopped, jolting them forward, and making his stomach forget the lemon balm. "Fuck! What's going on up there? Schwarz?" Schaefer, always alert and edgy at night, was heading towards the rear port with his black carbine eerie in the green cabin light. They all lined up behind him, checking knives and grenades in belts, tritium rich goggles ready to go, nothing between them and the vastness of the night steppe but a few centimeters of steel and ceramic. Suddenly the silence was split by a ringing voice from the cabin connector tube. "No worries. We seem to have hit a thicket and a river." Schaefer responded. "Klein, up on the top gun. Krause and Lange, take the left, check the thickets and the water depth. Mueller, you're with me. We'll take the right." One of the drivers knocked a fist into the cabin wall, the "all clear", and Schaefer swung the hatch open into the cooling night wind from the north.

His stomach was tight as he crouched through the hatch and jumped onto the firm ground, expecting a bullet to whizz at him, a wolf to jump from the impenetrable darkness, anything really. Out here, policy was "no lights, all nights" so after 21h23 today, strict reliance on the shitty goggles and scopes to avoid bringing a band of red raiders down on themselves. Who the fuck knew if it was worth it- maybe they'd come less often, but they were harder to hit when they did. Wasn't a *landser* writing that policy, that was certain. No bullets came, no crackle of brush, just a lonely silent wind snaking through the long grasses, hinting at the sweetness of sage left long behind. Out in the distance some lonely things howelled. The moon was thin in the deep, dark sky, a whiff or a waif of light on the edge of the west horizon, useless as he pushed through something that felt uncomfortably bramblish. No trees, of course (that didn't stop him from almost losing kilter after a stump worked its way against his ankle), but along water, the bushes grew thick, and many kept the thorns they needed on the vast deserts of prairie.

The river wound up being nothing more than a little creek, white stones almost as dry as bones, the water reduced to a rasping dark trickle against the bosom of the

ground. No problem at all for the halftrack. They dribbled back into the crew compartment, nerves on fire, stomachs pressed against sphincters, too awake to sleep, too strung out to talk. They banged around, stopping at 5 minute intervals to scan for embers by the riverside, dragging out what should have been 5 minutes by road, or 15 minutes at top gear, into almost an hour of nerve taxing work. And then, they stumbled onto the old camp-town, which brought the whole venture to a halt. If they had been a platoon, if they had been in the standard halftrack with 12 men, if they weren't a bunch of fuel engineers hauling 160 gallons of diesel... but out here, on the distant steppe, every man had to do their part, engineer to general, and the materials had to be done for the long haul. No reason to call out the flyboys for a load of fuel every day when they could push it themselves. You almost learned to envy the Reds with their ponies.

This was more than just a camp of a band of twenty- this had been a town, long ago. Empty skeletons and rotten carcasses of buildings stretched out along what might have once been dirt roads, now just patchy grass between the moldering timbers. There was no way that a platoon would have searched a morass of blindspots and caches like this at night, let alone a "field squad" on what should have been a routine patrol and gunning down of a couple bad actors. Schwarz or Schulz slammed to a stop. "What's the play boss? Buildings all around us, looks like a big chunk. We could probably arch around it, if you want to keep going." Schaefer sighed. "Alright, you know the drill. Lange and Krause, to the left. Keep your eyes open, eh, you know, just like the other 10 stops." The hatch swung open, and for the umpteenth time they spilled out.

The wind was still rustling down cool freshness from the north, but even with the gentle breeze, it was obvious that the camptown stunk. There was an awful smell of must and sweet rot, and if it hadn't been for the fresh air in the wind, he might have gagged. He and Krause took the left, moving through a field of knee high grass and thistle towards some craggy outline irradiated green inside the goggles. The wood was pale white from white-rotters, smelling of dust and age, ghostly timbers which crumbled at the touch. Then suddenly, Krause noticeably erect and nervous beside him, a skull appeared. Even with the green tint, he knew it, cavernous eyes, luminous dome, pointed canines. There were three more like it besides, a mother and her pups. The bones were clean around the skulls, but the bodies were still painted dark with splotches and scabby tissue. What would eat heads? Suddenly he felt the caffeine and nerves crash, ten minutes too early. His eyes felt dry, and his head felt hollow, and he just wanted to roll up in soft arms, get away from the bodies, the mutilation, the slow sense of panic. It was hard to believe that it had only been a month since they broke out past the river to hunt the red raiders.

The town was a veritable charnel house, it seemed, Schaefer and Klein and Mueller all reported the same- mounds of bones, cattle and camel and horse. It seemed as quiet as a tomb, even the heavy breaths of the men under their goggles weighed down by gear disappearing into the whispering of the quiet night. Schaefer had to see that even Lange couldn't keep up, coffee gnawing at his guts, the odor of decayed things growing in his mouth, the green tint of the dead place weighing on his soul. He, they, the whole place longed for the sun to return and banish the vision. Schaefer made the call, static coming in on their handhelds. "We'll zipper up here. One on the periscope, two hour watches. Stay sharp- these animals don't mind rot the way us civilized types do. Klein, you're first." With hanging hammocks, and bedrolls

pushed against the treadwells, the halftrack was just big enough to squeeze six men laid out at once. They squeezed in, leaving the hatch open, secure in the watch they would lead for each other and desperate for any fresh air. As unpleasant as the heat and the smell was, he still felt the old tug of camaraderie bedding down with his squad.

It must have been the middle of the night when Krause gently nudged his bedroll. "Mueller says it's your shift, Lange," he whispered into the thick air. He rolled out of the bed wrap and offered it to the thin apparition in front of him. Krause shrugged it off "I can't sleep with the smell, just trying to cool my thoughts." Lange shrugged, pulled on his jacket, and pants, velcroed his boots, and was climbing up the cupola ladder in less than a minute. The bleary, blurring efficiency of drill, he supposed, still gave him pride.

Dark skies without even the hint of the moon, stretched out for eternity around the little steel bubble, comfortable for one and cramped with two when Krause moved up to join him. A flick of the goggles told him the Mueller was relieving himself by some bushes, doubtless eager to drift off after two mind-numbing hours of boredom. It was in that half-awake state, high in the half turret, far from any warm sunlight or pleasant smell, that a flicker of motion seemed to catch his eye. He flipped the goggles back down and immediately began pumping the hydraulics to rotate the gun left. The world was once more cast in green and black, Mueller, turning around and zipping his pants, the dead bush, the silent wood of the town. And then suddenly a ferocious wail breaking cover. Something that smelled worse than dead was moving out of the bushes, fast, faster than the hydraulics of the turret could turn, too late- Mueller went down with a sudden cry as he grabbed for one of the small arms on the turret wall, "Get out of the fucking way or open fire you shithead!" Krause, stunned into paralysis, just a kid, just a kid who was going to get Mueller- his only! Source of nicotine! Killed! Fuck!

The gun didn't jam, spitting sunbursts of green light through the slit goggles, blinding him, "Krause, fucking spot me for fuck's sake! What the fuck are you-" but Krause was on again, goggles down, looking where Mueller had been, where he still was, was he living? Two large dark green shapes lying on each other, seeming to glow in and out, with breath. He sent Krause down, kept the autocannon pointing towards them in case anything else started moving, but all was still and quiet again. Out here, where the air and the grass of the plains deadened any sound, no commotion came from that sudden spurt of violence, not even a bird was stirred. Krause called back, that "it's some kind of giant leprose dog! Mueller is still breathing! I think I can carry him!" Why, Krause wasn't the only one to have shut down, he had too- sending the kid alone, jumping off the turret, such a panic over such an ass as Mueller, he could hardly believe it. Why hadn't they woken the others? He could tell they were awake- even with the ceramic plate and the insulating walls of diesel, they would have heard the shouts and shots from the cupola. Indeed, Schaefer and Klein were already moving up the ladder, and he could hear that the hatch was slamming shut. Time seemed to stretch and expand, like a rubber band overcorrecting as it returned to normal.

Mueller, really, was quite close, and the whole action from the shots firing to Schaefer reaching the cupola, could only have lasted thirty, forty seconds. Mueller got shunted back in, evidently unconscious, but seemingly unhurt besides a gnawed chunk of arm. Krause volunteered to dress him, and the others drifted back off to sleep, keeping the hatch sealed this time. A half hour of silence passed, the great

caravan of planets and stars traveling overhead, the silence of the fields and ruins, total. Maybe there was a lesson to be learned about keeping the goggles on, but the green light was so unnerving, casting around the charnel pit of an old dying world, populated by a long dead race, that gazing towards the future of the stars was the only thing he didn't mind doing. Fucking Russland. At some point Krause wandered back up, supposedly to let him know that Mueller had prophylactics and bandages and painkillers, and seemed to be snoozing. It only took the young man a couple minutes to reveal the real reason he was up, disrupting the cold quiet of the celestial clock. "Was it always like this?" he asked. "What, the stars?" Lange asked, genuinely taken aback. Krause gestured at the world outside the little steel dish "all of this." "The filth? Russland's full of primitive people... they've always lived in the mud like this, never had much marble or housing, let alone anything modern. Basically ran buck naked, didn't even have shoes when they fought Napoléon... or us. That's why they ride horses- they can't make halftracks." Krause shook his head.

"Look, it's like this. They had a Jew despot, this Stalin guy, who was like a Jew Attila the Hun. They woulda burnt every building and lived in tents all over our homes if we had let them. Bringing their sickness, weakness, and disease. They're all alcoholics, genetically, and fat and lazy too. Bad blood. Instead, we just filled our racial destiny, you know, bringing civilization out here, to our homes." Krause looked sour. "But haven't you heard the stories, you know, about the Lightning Rod program? That we brought the disease, but more than that- all the slaves, all the shootings... they say there was more than just Babi Yar..." What a bunch of liberal-catholic shit, he thought. "Look, you can fucking complain and conspiricize" he jabbed a finger at Krause. "But when it comes down to it, what does that have to do with people like our old sergeant Gunther, you know, who retired, and then got butchered on his own farm?" Krause stared. "Well, was it a slave? Was he across the river in the reserved land?" Lange almost stumbled, realizing he had no idea, but- "Of course not! He was a good man, a good soldier-" he paused, memories flitting back, welling up in his soul and heading towards his eyes, "look, it wasn't his fault his family got butchered by a bunch of savages! What's it to you anyway, got a little Jew blood in you, Catholic?" Krause smirked. "I confess with the German Church." He turned sour again. "I just, I can't, I mean." He paused, a little while, and then a long while, the stars circling above, dots of light amidst the massing blackness. "Aren't we a good people? Aren't we civilized? What are we doing here?" This time his gesture from the comfort of the cupola towards the rotting charnel that had been a town was unmistakable. Lange felt a little sorry for him, maybe he wasn't so weak-wristed as that. "Look kid, it's tough, but we have a job- keep the wolves at bay, keep civilization running. Keep people, keep our families safe. None of these slav-loving college kids in the Capitol can change that. None of this bullshit about changing weather, or slav rights, or whatever, changes the fact that we are a good people protecting our right to exist. Even here."

Eventually he changed shifts with Schaefer, fading into an uneasy rest. His dreams were full of dogs with rotting faces and hard noses chasing him around while Gunther yelled at him to shoot the red child who had been running with a gun. Near the end, the dogs caught up with him, the child was pointing and laughing like a demon while Gunther drew his own gun, diseased drool dripping onto his skull....

Rain was pounding the halftrack, a muffled drumming on the hull. Splashes of water came in through the cupola hatch. Schaefer was rolled tight in a hammock,

dripping wet clothes next to him. Schulz was setting up the electric water heater for coffee, threading the cord into an outlet. The cabin light had been changed from green to yellow to help them get up, now that the need for night vision was gone. Schwarz looked at him. "You've woken up to a black day." He looked around- Krause was missing. He turned back to schwarz who had a dark look under his salt and pepper beard. "Krause? Yeah, he was on the dawn shift, but we haven't seen him. Maybe he went to piss, got caught in the rain and decided to hunker in a building." "Shouldn't we look for him?" Lange asked. Klein, who was puffing on Mueller's vaporizer, turned. "You can try- but it's all turned to shit. The mud is deep and getting deeper. All the dead grass can't hold the water." Mueller looked pale and paler, except for his arm which glowed ruby red. The whole place reeked of wet socks, fever sweat, and the burning smell of a nearly empty nicotine cartridge.

After half an hour of enduring the smell, he pulled on his rain gear, and made his way up the ladder to the cupola. Anything had to be better than life in this swamp. The cupola was not much better. Everything smelled like cold fresh rain, which was nice; but every part of him felt the cold wet rain too, which wasn't. Somewhere behind the expanse of thick heavy gray clouds the sun hid its face. The storm system had moved up overnight, cutting them off from the light and the warmth of the sun, sinking them deeper into the mire of the ghost town. He scanned around, but saw no sign of Krause, not even footprints, likely washed out by the rain anyway. What to make of that? Had he split and run? He'd be far from the first deserter or moral objector, but they remained a tiny minority. He made the effort to call out- maybe he had just wandered off for an hour- nothing worthy of the firing squad there. Sheets of rain, each a tiny mortar round slamming into the earth, drowned out his voice. Occasionally he thought he saw ...*things* moving out there in the rot and mud. He told himself what was true- that he hadn't slept or eaten, that his nerves were strained, and that running water, in any case, WAS movement.

Klein banged on the cupola hatch "Get down here Lange, I'll take the shift. You warm up- there's coffee, and Schaefer has broken out his emergency stash." Lange knew what that meant- he wasted no time crawling back down the ladder to let Klein take his place again. The men all sat around the little electric kettle, catching the steam and mixing it with the burning marijuana. Lange folded his legs and joined them. A tin of hot coffee got passed his way, followed by a hit of the stuff. It was foully strong in the first breath, but familiar and relaxing. This was the life, worth the rain and the pain- to be here, with his squad, laughing and smoking, the weed and the coffee soaking into his body. After taking a big hit, Schaefer tried to speak but ended up spluttering over some smoke, sending them all into peals of laughter. He stopped choking, tears in his eyes, and then said "Lange, you big skeleton, you'll be excited for this" and he whipped out a little bag. Inside were packages, bright red and tan. "No! You didn't Schaefer!" There were seven of them, each delicious puffy bread and sweet rich chocolate, mass packaged Hoernchens. Before handing them out, Schaefer had something to say. "This is a little harsh on the mellow, but my front-comrades, you know that we thought this would be a single night of a mission. Instead, it's dragged out into this shit, and we didn't plan on rations. This is what we've got. Enjoy it. Also, uh, when the ground firms up a bit, we'll dig the tracks out, and get the fuck out of here." Mueller, who seemed feverish but awake butted into the group from his infirm bedroll. "And what about Krause?"

Nobody had an answer for that, which left the whole gathering in a pall of silent anxiety that not even the sweet bread could easily dispel. Caught between the two places, Lange decided to go back out in the rain, asking Schaefer to come up with him for a minute. After what seemed far too complicated a negotiation with Klein about who was coming up and who was coming down, and when, they made it up there. The rain was still drumming a barrage on the ever browner landscape, although now there seemed to be positive hints of a sun behind some of the more distant clouds. "Uh, Sergeant, ah, Krause was up all night you know, and he was talking to me on my shift. Some pretty heavy shit, you know, like conspiracies about the germ-units. "Lightning-Rod" and all that. Anyway... thought it might be helpful to tell you." Schaefer nodded, looked over the cupola, and spat into the muddy mass below. "It isn't, but I appreciate the heads-up." "How's that Sarge? Doesn't it mean he could be deserting?" "He could have been anyway. He's got a kid on the way back in Hohensalza, maybe he feels the call there. Doesn't matter anyway. He'll be mutilated meat on a coupla bones if he doesn't get back here fast."

Hours went like this, amongst the rubble of buildings and the landscape, trapped in the mud and the rain, forsaken by the sun. It was getting on towards the evening (or maybe only midday), and he was down in the hull when he heard it for the first time. A dull rasping knock followed by a rasp that could have been grinding metal.... "Laaaangee, Lange, it's meeeee Kraaaaauseee" He jolted up from the bedroll where he had been fiddling his thumbs and trying not to smell. Everything seemed silent- Mueller, fast asleep with his red arm, Schulz and Schwarz probably sucking each other off in the cabin, Schaefer up top, and Klein writing in a journal. "Klein, psst Klein! Did you hear that?" Klein looked his way like he was crazy. "Hear what? It's the silence of the tomb in here." Lange sank back. Just his nerves.

Five minutes later, the knock and the rasping voice returned. "Laaangeee, Laaangeee, you know it's true, you knooooow I'm right." Lange jumped up again, this time drawing Klein's attention as he smacked his head into Mueller in the hammock above him. "Ah fuck, sorry man. Look Klein, I swear I heard Krause out there, he sounded hurt... I'm going to tell Schaefer." He started pulling on his rain gear again. Klein looked at him even more bizarrely. "Krause? Who's that?" For a second, the world seemed to break, shattering like glass into a hundred thousand pieces. Hot and cold ran up and down his spine. "Come on Klein, don't fuck around at a time like this. Krause- the seventh man here, who's been missing all day? You seen him?" Klein looked back. "Who are you to pin this on me? I'm supposed to be crazy, huh, that there's a missing seventh man from the squad? Fuck you buddy." Neither of them got up to check with Schaefer. Maybe the other was just as insecure, or maybe they were the butt of a joke. "What the fuck was in Schaefer's weed then?" Klein asked, and Lange had to laugh at that, breaking the tension for a moment.

The conversation, unsettling as it was, had ended the rasping sounds which like Krause were never to return. Time dragged itself out again, reaching in and out of the halftrack. The five of them would wander in and out of the hull and the cupola and the cabin, drink some caffeinated water, or give some fresh to Mueller. The convivial atmosphere of the morning was dead, or maybe undead, replaced by paranoid and schizoid. He drifted off into a haze of boredom. The constant sound of the rain drumming the hull faded in and out, constant to everything but his sense. It was in this fugue that Schaefer shouted down the hatch about something outside. He and Klein looked back and forth at each other in a haze. Of course, the drivers could not

go, and one of them should look after Mueller, who seemed at once redder and whiter than ever. Lange sighed and pulled on his rain stuff and pushed open the back hatch. Staring at him was a thin young man with straight straw blonde hair and freckles. Under the clear plastic rain layer he wore the plain black t-shirt of a panzer man, with the shining bronze *erkennungsmarke*, but he had never seen him. Also, he stank of garlic- well, he didn't just stink of it, he wore it in a huge garland of green stalks and pale bulbs threaded over his left shoulder. "Lange! You'll never believe what I found!" he shouted triumphantly.

"Uh, who the fuck are you exactly?" Lange asked. "Uh, *panzerpionier* Karl Krause?" the man responded. Lange stared. He had never heard the name in his life, but the man, the boy, was being too familiar. Maybe he was in a different unit. He turned around and saw Klein smiling through the hatch. "Krause! Where the hell have you gotten off too?" The blonde stepped up to the hatch, stinking mud and water splashing everywhere, bringing the smell of rot into the hull along with the sulfurous odor of garlic. Lange felt faint and quite ill. The so-called Krause stomped and splashed all over the bedrolls and loudly discussed how he hoped that the garlic might help Mueller as his "*mutti* in Bavaria says they hold all the prayers that go into the bulb domes on the churches there" and that "afterall, the God of the Germans would not let a brave soldier die of something like a dog." Well, maybe not Germans, but Lange had seen plenty of red raiding camps they'd leave full of corpses and sick men, only to return a month later to find nothing but wolf prints. *He* wasn't a sucker to fall for superstitions about wolf-men or onion domes- the only way that a Red man became a wolf was in the belly of the beast; and garlic was only good for a stew.

It seemed that the sun had, at long last returned. Schulz had volunteered to watch from the cupola while Schaefer and Schwarz napped in the cabin. Klein wrote in his journal (although how the boring events could occupy more than a line escaped Lange) while this "Krause" chanted and hung garlic around Mueller who seemed to be having a fit. Lange went up to the cupola, almost slipping on the rain slick rungs, to check on the weather, but really to get away from the smells again. Schulz was napping, or in a trance, facing out to the east, eyes closed and jaw firm like a propaganda poster. He realized that his ears, so desensitized to the incessant sound of the pounding rain, heard only silence like the thundering of guns. Of course there was no awakening of birds in this foul dead place- nor was there the sweet smell of clean ground, only the reek of rot and a plague of bacterial filth in the mud. Over this broken and drowned landscape, dying red light from the west cast the whole scene in long shadows. The smell made him gag, so he climbed over the cupola onto the top of the hull, made his way to the back to spew. Schulz, eternal guardian, remained unseeing. He closed his eyes and tried to block out the scent of what was coming out, mostly bile and coffee, but some sick compulsion drove him to look down. Buried under the mud he saw where the exhaust pipe should have been sticking clear out. It wasn't. He felt the steady idling of the engine providing light and heat and hot water, thrumming gently under his heaving stomach. He felt weak, suddenly, his head spinning, his stomach turning like the sky.

He must have fainted out there in the clear fresh air, like a sissy or a child. "Pull it together Lange," he thought as he stood back up just in time to see the last slice of the fat orange sun sink into the mud. The sky was transcendent, streaked with turquoise and and purples, the south-west glittering with gold brocade from the fumes of the far-off industrial basin. He looked around, shivering, feeling goosebumps and a

sudden chill despite the summer heat. Pockets of water and flats of wet dirt stretched out around them, matted dead grass like the hair on a river-corpse. No doubt it would take another day entirely to dig the half track out, and with the exhaust pipe having blown the backup valves and venting fumes into the cabin all day... well, hopefully not to permanent damage. He had heard stories though, of a *panzermann* or two who had kept the hatch closed on the coles with the pipe rimed over... He coughed, heavily, for good measure, feeling waves of phlegm rack out of his body. As an after-thought he looked over at the cupola- empty. He looked towards the sinking white bones, bleached timbers of the old savage camp, and saw a thin dark-haired man sneaking through the building, trying to wade quietly through the knee-high mud. He peered into the cabin- the hatch was still open, thank God, then rapped the top to call up Schaefer and Klein. He grabbed a black rifle from the cupola's rack and gestured towards the receding figure. They nodded. Given the dying light, it took another twenty-five seconds to lace up the helmets and goggles, alert Schwarz and Schulz, and be off on the hunt. No one went to take a piss with a gallon of water and a gallon of diesel after all.

They hunted wolfishly, slinking between the corpse-buildings, and found him meeting a huddled lump of flesh surrounded by what looked like ash boughs cast in sliver by the half-moon which brightened in the sky. It was impossible to be sure what it was- maybe a German mother and her children had sook refuge in this tiny patch of green. More likely, Lange thought, was that it was some Red leper or twisted jewish shaman of a commissar, practicing unclean, un-German, uncivilized, unchristian acts with the naive. Being the case, they crept closer, first through the timbers and the fetid mud gore which stuck to these ribs, and then through the delicately scented plant, almost lemony almost herbal here in the immensity of the waste. Unfortunately, getting closer gave no more answers. The moon was too bright now, unveiled by the clouds, for the night-sight to work well, and in the silver glow of the rising night, it was impossible to discern the racial traits of the skull. Krause evidently was cradling the ragged body, whispering, pouring water to the head. It was either holy or unholy, caught in the glow of the moon, a scene of (foppish, Lange cautioned) christian charity or of eminently unjust and treasonous succor to a barbarian rapist who would soon have his knife in the ribs of a fair child. The silence and the stillness of the scene, the calm of the greenery which somehow existed without the chatter of any other living thing, was shattered by a harsh burst of static. "Fuck. Schaefer, we need to move. Word is there's some kind of big fight, maybe a massacre. They jumped us in our sleep back at the main camp. The Captain is calling for anyone. Come in? Schaefer? Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck" Lange felt his stomach loosen, felt something pushing at his sphincter. He raised himself up on his hindlimbs, pushing hard and standing tall. Krause looked up and over in shock. Lange stood up, ears alert, and pointed his gun. "Are you German?" he barked, no response, he closed towards the gapping Krause and the rags, hackles raised. It was a woman, and on her head was something old, once tan, now so burnt by the sun as to be bare cotton threads, a garnet star caked in mud. Lange didn't even glance at Krause as he opened up. He howled. "Fucking fops. Fucking around with their harlot savages, while we're being jumped. He turned back towards Schaefer and Klein. "Let's go, let's fucking go, maybe the mud is thick enough that the tracks will run. Good German engineering, right? No way a bunch of horse riding fuckheads fucking red savages could jump us and get away with it. We'll whip 'em. Kuestner'll whip 'em. He always has."

Under the pale half-moon, a patch of vetch sat soaked in blood, two limp figures stained dark under the light, calling out in agony in this tiny garden. Nothing would come to lap up the richness of their lives which sank into the hungry mouth of the land. Fifty miles away, men so much like the one who had made the scene, who had spilled the fresh blood of two still-living corpses, a sacrifice of young romance to the dark god of Order, huddled and sweated in brimstone and smoke as steel plates crumpled under the delicate explosive cherry-blossoms of high explosive and tungsten.

21: 180 Greenwich



Jo found himself sitting along the rocky beach of the Baltic seaside. He had to imagine himself facing West- how else would he face it, the shoreline he had been raised facing. Perhaps we find ourselves facing different directions. The moon was sinking towards the waves which pounded ceaselessly, furiously against the hard rocks which jagged under him. Across this churning mass of froth and waves, water was splintering into white foam along the deep rising land. The royal blue of the background to the bright three-quarter moon rushed with the sound of surf from the horizon of dark space brushed with golden dawn. The waves were marked with strange black sigils of shadow and burning orange of a reverse skyline. He turned towards the towering skyscrapers of the "neue-welt" that had risen so recently, mirrors of glass and steel filtering the pink and orange hues of natural dawn into the strange ritual of shadow-dances along the christian waves of Terra Mariana. The dusky glow of the unrisen sun began to brighten into dancing gold ribbons more spectacular than the finest threads of Aurora Borealis, and he found himself thinking of something outside himself.

A man, gray in his eyes and gray on his clothes roused himself in the cold concrete barracks facing East in eternal vigilance. As he rubbed the sleep from his weary skull, the glow of sunrise grew, brightening into gusts of orange, yellow and white dancing along the skyline. Gazing up towards the high, high moon, he found only blackness and murk like a full septic tank, but the dancing flame in the East only grew brighter, folding into fabric of dancing swords and clashing armies. The loud zipper-chatter of frontier auto-turrets rang out, shattering the pressed rounds of copper and brass into a dark horizon lit with this artificial sun. White flags began to bound in front of him, prompting his own fire, chattering rounds and hot cartridges sent bouncing around the bunker, but the flags were only the raised tails of deer and bouncing rabbits, little bodies torn asunder by ripping lead. The flame grew brighter and brighter, hotter and hotter

Jo found himself fleeing into icy cold waves of spring tide, freezing water rising up above his thick boots, filling them, rising against the weakness of his knees, rising with chilling water against his groin, freezing his testicles. Light from behind him grew brighter and brighter, the conflagration from the east burning the skyline of twisting glass and steel, burning the streets and trees he had grown under. The moon receded in front of him as the burning explosion grew, yellow eating away at the delicate dawn in a flood tide of color, yellow replaced with the gold of diamond refracting light on the airborne dew of dawn, a burning halo around the transcendent sun, shining as bright as golden paint in the hut of that Urali traditional artist with his Icons, golden halo crowning the light that burned to bright, grew to fast to be gazed on, the face of God, the warmth of the Saving Spirit, the ice of the water chewing and gnawing at his pitiful torso, eating the little pools of fat and the dips of bone, fire from above, heat from a thousand burning suns ignited on a whim of fear and frenzy in the east, consuming everything, burning, burning....

His mouth felt dry as he rose suddenly from horizontal, body folding into a right triangle, alert and erect and panting in fear in his Tipi's predawn darkness. He exhaled quietly, and turned his neck to gaze at the sleeping bundles of bearskin and straw-blond hair. A feeling of paternal confusion-contempt, envy, and deep love- gripped him as he gazed at the children who slept close to each other inside the protecting folds of the tent. Sighing, he grabbed his goatskin canteen and pulled a long drain of river water, soothing the cracked heaving of his throat, soothing him back to calmness, back to sleep, back into a world where the sun had not yet risen.

Sieglinde stared at the digital screen, wishing it would flicker off back into a silvery mirror. It didn't. The right edge of the screen seemed to be bleeding a brilliant red, pushing along the lower third of the screen into what should have been a serene green-washed picture of Europe. She let out a tremendous sigh of frustration and

stress. Of course, it would happen now of all times- what else had she been expecting? Fuck. She laced fingers, buffed and and shining gray nails, a thin ring of copper (was it greening again already? In the middle of the mesh, pushed her arms out. That didn't make the map vanish. She let out another sigh, turned around, and took a seat in the plush leather recliner behind the obsidian desk. There was a lot of work to do.

By the time the digital readout hit 12, her hand was cramped from a hundred paper memos to different departments, water stamped and sealed "VS/NfD" informing various desk heads and commanders of a meeting in the afternoon, sent out by vetted courier (easier to vet a courier than to vet every hand that touched a keyboard these days) and then she had Horst, her eternally present deputy begin to sort and file the plans they were drawing up. So many gallons of fuel directed to these airbases, shift x thousand canisters here, recall orders for personnel there, an immense web of minutiae. The theorists out at Heidelberg came up with inane ideas about how the bureaucracy of the Republic was like the lymph or vasculature of the national-organism, which made her the... thymus? It was beyond her. Economists in Frankfurt-am-Main would liken it to an old fashioned mother balancing the checkbooks of a family as the man went out to combat the sun-drenched soil or hot steel. A hundred poetic ways to describe what was really just glorified punch-card computing, paper pushing no different from what they did at IG or FDW. But a woman had to have moments of grandeur too she knew, and when she got out the pressed official uniform, stiletto heels just sharp enough to tense the calves, standing in an auditorium or an official dinner with an audience in rapt attention- well, she imagined no one more similar to her than Genghis Khan, hoary from a campaign, magnificent in shimmering furs and silks, surrounded by kneeling enemies.

Her bureau was at the far end of the great domed capitol building, windows cut into the massive granite and marble facade which dominated the city. To get from the zebra stripes of sunlight and aluminum slat shadow that marred her huge chair, to the public canteen required ten minutes of maneuvering staggering corridors of arches and great tilting right angles of stairways. There was no easy or accessible route of course- even here, especially here, the image of toughness and physical ability had to be maintained. So of course, she sent Horst to fetch a fresh mug of coffee and an apple as she went over the notes for the presentation one last time.

Sometimes she felt set up to fail- the events of the past 10 months had weighed heavy on her, much more heavily than she had expected. Of course, the death of the only popular Governor General since the attempted Slaver's Coup had spelled Problem with a capital P, and then there was the missing Naval radical who they'd somehow promoted up to a command... and now this. 300 settlements, maybe twice that in homesteads burned in the past month alone. Most of them, 4 in 5 probably, were illegally inside the wild preserve, looking for cheap land or freedom from debt collectors or gold in the hills. Rogues and schmucks and utopian fundamentalists, but they were all citizens and many were dead or maimed or missing into the savage waste. Some response had been necessary- the 7th Armored Brigade had been doing maneuvers in the South East to encourage the big estates to remember that the Republic would enforce manumission within the decade, and they had enough muscle to flex. What ever stupid fucking Aryan brained adjutant had given the go ahead on that should be fired. Now, the debacle of losing a whole Corps in the inhospitable waste of grass had happened. Beyond catastrophic, beyond humiliating. No way they wouldn't push for something aerial, wide dispersing for a 1 of ours, 10 of theirs

retaliation. That was why she was there- previous governments had fallen over revelations of that kind of thing. Conventional explosives would have to do the trick, targeted too. The average Hans preferred the government keep gloves on when dealing with people, even as brutal and dirty and incomprehensible as this. The lying press might scream murder today, but tomorrow it would be pictures of little charred bodies and blank blue eyes flecked with bloody spittle. Strictly Forbidden these days, which was the purpose of her office, at least in name. All she had to do was get the men who were convinced that a tank of chlorine made their cock bigger to see that she had the biggest cock of them all.

She dropped the apple core down the compost chute outside her office, checked that the spritz of geosmin perfume, fresh rain and clean soil redeemed her fiber rich healthy post-coffee pre-speech shit, double checked that the files were in hand, and then calmly strode towards the little conference room. It was alarmingly conventional to the early 60's when it had been built- all spartan concrete to appear spendthrift, a plastiglass table surrounded by typical office chairs, long thin windows with concrete spacers making a ladder on the wall, and then a small side table with an electric hotplate and percolator for coffee. Horst and a few other uniformed adjutant types were already there, heating water, shuffling papers, bickering over seating arrangements, the type of stuff she had spent her twenties getting fed up with. She placed herself at the left foot of the table, a suitably innocent position, and then realized she needed something from the secure room. She had to move with haste, a challenge that almost made her rip her heels off and run on foot, but she made good time without a loss of dignity. The three security men (all in different uniforms) checked her ID pass, recognized the request form she'd submitted through the network earlier, and brought out the little battery powered laminate projector. It was nostalgic almost, to see this little analog box of glass and mirrors with the overhead lens, something that had disappeared in the microchip revolution since the civil strife and her classroom days. When she returned, a line of officers and heavily starched bureaucrats had formed outside the door as the adjutants were performing the perquisite bug-sweep. She noted that Doctor Peters, the President's political advisor, as well as Big Will, the flamboyant head of the airforce. Her memos had done the trick, she thought with pride.

Everyone suitably convinced that the room was free of bugs, the Secured projector rolled in and the side table rolled out. As the men, a collection of the most powerful individuals in the entire nation, filtered past their adjutants, they were handed pre-filled styrofoam cups of coffee. These days, you never knew when a disaffected Security Service man might leak a recording of a sybaritic comment, trying to bring down the administration with a little leak of railroad corruption, blow the whistle on some steamy scandal and put the whole of the manumission commission in boiling water. Granted, it was paranoid- but you never knew who was bitter about the purificationists winning out over the pragmatists. It could be anyone of them, she thought looking at the adjutants- no, it could be any one of us.

The paranoia had begun she thought, placing the first page, a chart of the raid-vulnerable population East of the Vistula on the projector, the paranoia had really begun when so do-gooder jew-loving christian moralist had leaked information about Operation Sea-Green and the attempt to get Ural gold to the public. Hans J. Folk had bought the impression of a couple overzealous kids and partying Cossacks when they had heard about Babi Yar, but the widespread chlorination beyond the borders played

badly, as did the image of Krupp slaves serving caviar. Too reminiscent of the asiatic tsar or old gentry- so factions had splintered and lumped, and a race for the nuclear control had begun before a slow phasing of manumission and the creation of her Desk for Slav Affairs, a check on gung ho generals. She realized that she had mechanically drilled her way through the estimated losses and was now talking about the threat to the Weissesmeer-Noordsee pipe.

“Our estimates indicate that most of the raiding bands, some 10,000 savages, are operating south of the Ural Pass, lurching in the direction of Fort August-” she tapped the confluence of the Wolga and Kasanka rivers “and so shouldn’t be at risk.” She stopped talking and surveilled the room. Getting all the thick numbers out of the way early on was risky- maybe it would turn attentions off but hopefully they’d be focusing on their coffee still. The actual data weren’t important, just a formality. “So- we all know that our first frontier reversal in generations happened two weeks ago. I have my ideas, but what do you gentlemen-” she gestured with a stiff nail at the men who suddenly came to attention “propose to do to correct this humiliation?” Her finger came to rest pointing directly at the Chief of Staff. For three seconds her finger hung in the air, then it folded into her palm, and she moved back to her seat. Heads swung down to coffees or drifted rightwards to gaze at the map. CoS von Hohenborn slowly reddened. The silence stifled even the quiet throat clearing of Peters. “Gentlemen, I am here to protect the spirit of the German Nation from dirtying itself with Slavic barbarism. I was promised that in an open field of combat, these armored tanks could smash any ragtag group of horsemen. Now we have 3,000 missing men. What will you say to their families?” Peters finished clearing his throat. “The present administration... feels sensitive to concerns about excesses... excessive applications of force against... primitive-” she cut off the wavering baltic accent which faded in and out. “Does the Reichspräsident believe that recoilless rockets and mines are ‘primitive’ or ‘savage’ when they blow off the limbs of our proud sons?” She was leaning into the ‘Germania- Our Mother’ image now. “Is the President endorsing death as a sentence when bold pioneers cross the Wolga looking for new fields? Does he sit by as these crimes of hate an barbarism occur on *our own people*?”

The silence grew. Although the afternoon was starting to drag on, the long summer sun still cast light through the gray bars of concrete. Peters coughed. “What do you propose, Mrs. Frieda?” von Hohenborn asked, almost collegially. She smiled through the slight and the hint of venom. “I believe, Most *Honorable* Chief of Staff, that drastic pacification measures must be taken to ensure civilization prevails on the frontiers. With the upcoming manumission expected to involve...” What words to use? “...Considerable resettlement of servile Slavic groups in their transuralic homeland, ensuring that peace and order await is most important for the stability of our Destined Lands.” The military men looked unimpressed at the wordplay, the starched suits stacked fat fingers in pensive thought, and she drew herself up, filling the empty space on the map with her figure. “A swift and decisive bolt from the heavens must be employed to remind the Reds about our certain racial destined superiority. I have brought von Ribbentrop, head of the Strategic Reserve, to confirm our estimates that in a single blow we can clear this rat’s nest of perdition, bandits and their sluttish camp followers, in a single clean blow. No need for contaminant warfare here.” Another silence. “Purely conventional?” Peters asked with sudden clarity. At this von Ribbentrop looked up. “Yes. Purely conventional.”

It was early July and the hints of disaster were trickling in over the radio. Frieda had a hardline to her adjutant, Weber in the Eastern DC headquarters, to confirm them, and her mind was racing. Images of burned homes, and now dead soldiers, missing chunks of skin or noses, other mutilations and terrors of all sorts. Powerful images, racing through her mind, coursing through her blood. The scent of smoke (familiar from camping expeditions) and blood (imagined to be sour, somehow) pouring out into the blue sky and wafting back to the homes and marble statues. She spun her big leather chair, faced the window, and leaned back. The web of marble and concrete, plastic and steel and glass, kaleidoscopes of gold embossment and green parkway and arches and columns stared back at her. Somewhere distant along the webway of asphalt and concrete, whistles from the trains sounded. A jet roared overhead. What a paradise of modernity! Cool air pumped around buildings in these dog days of July, green leaves and sunlight, clean air and easy traveling, magnificent monuments! It had had costs to build, and then costs to maintain, costs the boys on the plains were paying blood even now, but here? It was easy to see why they had to be paid.

This gave her pause- who was she to pay with the blood of others? She thought about that. The hard toil of pioneer peasants, of soldiers and engineers, battling the hostile expanse of the plains, the fierce colds and thick timbers of the north, the hard rock holding gold and oil, and the beastly scalping Reds who threatened to butcher families who struck out alone. She would pay the price of course, but if it could be pushed away, out of sight and mind? Across the mountains, create a new line of forts under her Desk? Maybe there, away from the whips of the Junkers who laughed at the name "Kohler" behind her back, away from the blood mines of the Krupp Doneska, the Reds could even be civilized, introduced to letters and laws and farms with fences. Maybe they could, despite what the Professors in their Universities claimed about the necessary extinction of lesser, about mixing and diluting and blood groups and bacteria platters, maybe they could just give them a little space reserved to live on, away from the metals that the Nation, the Republic, needed. She slumped back further, pushing the springs in the chair to a greater extent, images of forts and flags in the mountains, of happy red-faced dark haired children pulling beets from the Siberian soil. They just needed to be reminded of their place in the order of things. And then the Generals and the intellectuals who fellated them only needed to be reminded that they were a generation past their prime, that the people no longer needed this hulking standing army around, draining grain from the fields. Like Dinosaurs, they had played their part in the ladder of being, the chain of life, and now ought to be preserved only as bones for knowledge and display. With them out on parade, the People's government could finally bring peace and order to the frontier, take it out of the hands of the rough riding men, toss out these theories that they men in headquarters and schools had about 'roughness breeding vitality' and start saving the lives of the children and the families who brought the Nation further towards the destiny of the three W's- wisdom, expanse, and prosperity. She picked up the pen, and began addressing a memo to the misfit Air Commander, who doubtless had his own problems with the expense budget of the tankmen.

Von Hohenborn started rubbing his hands in a nervous pattern, like he was holding a ball. "The Volunteer command could mobilize some Hiwi's, back up the 8th and 16th Armored Brigades, push up from the south..." Peters looked over at him, and

the room followed this swivel of a wide cheeked head. He pursed his lips. "Marshal, you had a shot, and it missed. That loss could bring down the Party in the next set of regionals. He turned towards von Ribbentrop and stared for two seconds. He swiveled back towards von Hohenborn, took off his half moon glasses, grabbed a square of silk from his breast pocket, and began polishing. "I am aware, of course, that this is a matter of honor and pride for... the army, and of course that... you wish for morale purposes to avenge this loss... however I wonder what the timeline for... such an operation might be..." his droning voice seemed to only add to the growing oppressive silence from the dozen men who still had not said a word. Von Ribbentrop's brows deepened. Von Hohenborn grimaced beneath his mustache as if he was being asked a petty technicality as a trap, but after a second's pause he charged forward. "Two weeks to move the units to forward positions, another to launch maneuvers, and probably another two to entirely sweep the units. First we'll have to cut them off from any ammunition chains, and then-" Peters held up a hand. "If... you were to move with more haste... would there be risks of a repeat of... the 7th?" "Nonsense! The army will move at full speed with diligence, and the errors of that fool Kuestner won't be repeated!"

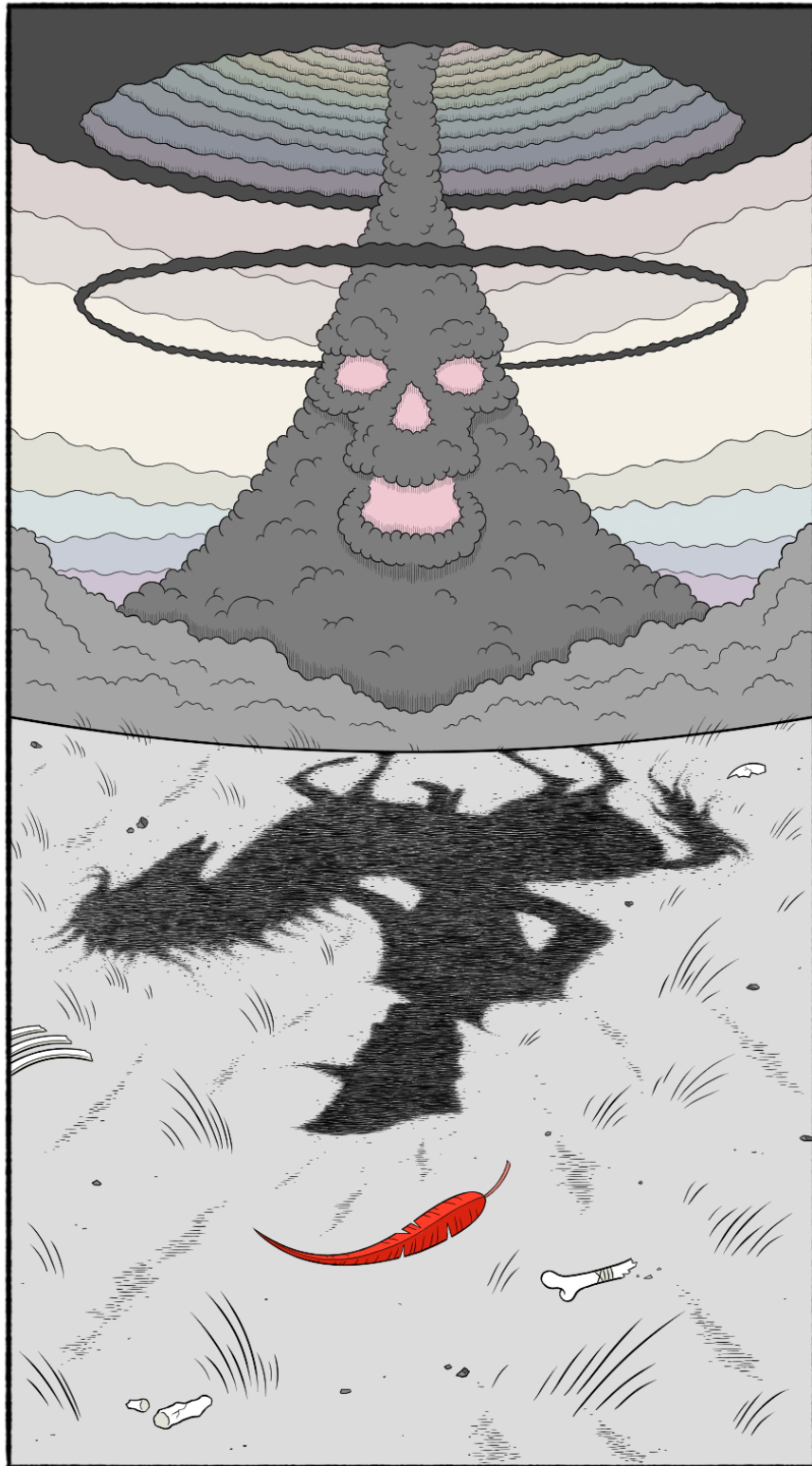
This was a blunder. Von Ribbentrop's smile split his syphilitic face. Peters pursed his lips, put away the little silk square, and replaced his glasses. He turned to von Ribbentrop, avoiding her gaze. "If you can guarantee a conventional-only successful destruction... which maybe just an old fantasy... but the Regional vote is in two weeks... so if you can launch before then... we would" he gestured around the room, including von Hohenborn, "...be appreciative of the effort... and should it fail, we will... still move the Caucasian command up to the rivers..." his voice faded out, leaving stillness. Von Hohenborn seemed to be turning purple, clenching his hands as if trying to splinter the glass tabletop in their grip. Peters stood up. "Now... I think we will be adjourned... the cabinet will have to... discuss how to present this as a... proportional and noble retaliation to a brutal massacre... and avoid parallels with any... prior ignoble activity..." He stood, brushed the top of his head almost absentmindedly, picked up the tan dossier, and moved towards the door. "Frieda, come walk with me..."

He was moving slowly, so she was able to gather her dossier, clear the papers from the projector, flip the switch, shuffle out with such a cluttered mess as all that, and hand off the room key to Horst before he was at the end of the hallway. A brisk pace caught her back up with Peters. "Mr. Doctor, what can I do for you?" she said too breathlessly for her liking. He glanced at her. "Mrs. Kohler..." he paused waiting for confirmation. She never would feel comfortable correcting them to her official Women's League rank- a state function not so different from "Marshal von Hohenborn", so she nodded politely through the slight of misintention. "...I want you to know that our office is aware that you believe the Frontier must be pushed into Slav country... and that it isn't worth it to resist the natural push towards the mountains..." he seemed to look expectantly at her, but after a silence of no more than four seconds, he relapsed into speech "and also that you believe that reserving land useless... for our race... to the slav is a means to educate them into... our culture and way of life over a period... in short that... their barbaric condition can be uplifted..." Now there seemed to be a slight sneer in his words, perhaps patriarchal chauvinism towards what he saw as weakness- though he stood of course for the status quo, peace and a hard frontier. "I make no secret... that I believe the relentless expansion... of our farmers and frontiersmen to be the source of pointless conflict... that we might never reach our

own Pacific coast, only find ourselves... dragged into a bog of barbarism across the tundra and waste... always pushing further into the morass..." he trailed off in his sleepy fashion. She matched his silence, and this time he lasted a full ten seconds before breaking.

"If the bombing works of course... I can see that Hohenborn" (No honorific for him! She thought) "would be upset... but likely peaceable if offered bases throughout the mountain passes... and the Navy by a little more arctic coast... you know how they are about playing polar explorer" she finally reacted with a polite nod "but I can see that behind this nice compromise arrangement... farmland stretching out and under the mountains... wilderness for pioneers and lumber companies... another generational push from these marble cities towards debtless freedom... your hand at work.." He stopped abruptly here. Had he been trying to console or steel himself? "The President will expect full support from the National Women's League in return." She narrowed her eyes. "I worry that this draws the spirit, further from, not close too the grace of God- ours or theirs." Now he was all curt bullet points. Now he stopped totally, turned to face her, icy blue eyes, pale hair, sallow and red skin sagging, "But if Regionals turnout poorly, especially among women, then the good Marshal will get armor patrols to his waist, and your beloved peasants will find barbed wire on the far side of the Wolga." She understood- he was bitter that the President saw the need for her plan. She understood that too well- she saw the need to act the token, represent 130 million fair women's souls as part of a deal for national freedom and peace. She nodded, more stiff with resentment than she would have liked, torn between her feelings of pride at being the standard bearer and representative of the League, anger at being seen as just a woman leading to tense and overly formal nods. She extended her hand to shake, surprising him but forcing an instinctual reciprocation (a small consolation, especially after her grand success in silencing Hohenborn) and then "I understand. If you would excuse me Mr. Doctor, I must now go and-" her voice, still tense with conflict cut, so she simply gestured at the cart. He nodded, turned away, then turned back. "It was, Ms. Kohler, an impressive presentation if you don't mind the comment" as if the slights would be washed away, salved by an obvious fact. She nodded again, then with conspicuous calm and gentleness took the cart and turned away. Fortunately the dossiers which threatened to jump off stayed in place, saving what face she felt like she had around that sort of jackass. There was work to be done, memos to be sent and lists to be compiled, and no time to waste.

22: Glow Brighter From the Blaze



Here it was, the ash. It came hurtling out in a pyroclastic flow from the blast. Just like in the dream that had woken him as he set out, the detritus of ten thousand lives, swam towards him surrounding him, raining down bits of bone and grease and char. The concussive waves of heat and pressure smashed and shaped his body into new forms, breaking it, crushing his brain inside his skull, then his skull itself. In that last instant, the infinitude of time after the last possible EEG reading could have been taken, the space between moments, Out of Time Itself, Hell waited, an auto-da-fe of self-judgment- reflection on his broken life so far from the love and grace of God, so close to bleak sin. The black binders of orders and secret projects, ledgers of blood and lives, adding weighty guilt to his conscious memory as it broke out into the wide world in a spew of vaporizing and burning carbon lattices. Hell was not a meting out of justice by a judge from on high: it was only his conscious recognition in that last gasp of oxygenated electrical impulse of what he was; and in that Nazi uniform, following that Nazi nation for so much of his life, how could *he* find it in himself to lovingly reconcile that with God's own commands, despite- no because- of that absolute loving forgiveness of the universe? Scattering matter, the detritus of a life, the void. How had it all gotten here?

Four Days Out

It was a good time. The grass was thick and ripe, long floating heads of seed being snapped up by the horde of horses who left a fertilizing and rejuvenating trail of waste in their wake. August sun beat down as hot as anything, making him sweat out liters of water a day, which would have forced them to stay close alongside a river if there hadn't been the huge tanker trucks full of the stuff they took from the German Panzercorp's supply train. He might have been hesitant, but the plan was so solid and simple that it had to work. They had a big superiority in numbers, lots of the tashkent rocket launchers and hundreds of liquor bottles sold to northern trappers, bought back full of arctic oil and wrapped in fast-dissolving styrofoam. All they'd had to do was wait for the wind to be in the right direction and enough of the armored infantry to split off looking for any homesteads left to protect, and wham- under the cover of a prairie fire, hot as hell, driving deer and rabbits before it, they had pushed past the thermal vision of the tanks, gotten close enough on the other-wise exposed steppe, and then- bam! Of course, he hadn't done too much with the fire- they decided that he'd be better off trying to peel Germans out into the desert of grass with the nurses and camp-followers than smashing through a wall of flames on a horse- that was much better left to men who had been born in the saddle. Now were the good times- the happy hunting times, chasing down the stragglers as their armor ran out of gas, and then on foot, moving slower and getting fat and lazy and sleek in the august heat. He didn't know where they'd go from here, and no worries because- they'd smashed a Fucking Panzer group! A feat unheard of in his lifetime he was sure. What couldn't be done from behind this rose-gold glow?

Marat (sometimes he heard Murad; what was his sloppy Russian, or genuine double meaning to the Turk he had no idea) was holding that little digital camera as Jo and the rest of the group gathered around a puffball that was dangling from a rope over the fire. He was camera shy- that much was plain to Marat who usually kept the device inconspicuous, but he seemed to be growing sloppy. He'd been filming since the day they met, evidently charging the battery with the steel engine of the war beast they rode in, Jo having been under one kind or another of State surveillance most his life had quickly grown re-accustomed. Perhaps it was for the man's posterity, in which he

could have no quibble. Still, he was eminently aware and sensible to the presence of that electric eye; but no one else seemed to mind terribly, so he did his best to ignore it. Also around the fire stood Isaak the Pomorskoje man who had baptized him, Vanya the peasant boy who was slowly growing out of his hermitude; the young German boys Freidrich and Wolfgang who he had taken charge of once they had been- well, war was a nasty business, and one had to feel for the children, even if they couldn't simply spare the farm families who were nothing but the "tip of the spear" of the great displacement of people. Also there were Anghel and Nikoulai, slaves who had broken away from their bondage, swum across the Wolga, and somehow managed to meet up with what they saw as the Great Cossack, sort of a folk memory maybe of older Russian legends.

It was an eclectic but friendly group, and the Germans had managed to gain a good measure of acceptance for who they were, if not respect. The slaves of course who had had families broken and beaten and raped; the steppe men who had seen herds strafed, tents burned, and wives scalped; the farmers who had seen fields and grain houses of hard labor burned, and children poisoned or maimed by mines; all looked with sadistic duty upon the Settlers who bore behind them the weight of the atrocity machine. Who could fail to understand? It was for that purpose they'd broken the plains armies of the Great Capitol in the West, for that they'd struck a blow of human liberation. Their eyes could see the Glory, and hallelujah it had come! Now their eyes could also see the thick smoke of spores that the puffball let off as it exploded in the heat, a fuming column of gray mixing with the wispy smoke of the hot fire. The children laughed, the little Wolfgang already more comfortable and quicker to forget his old life than Friedrich, who sometimes seemed quite dour for a nine year-old. It was a bizarre situation, and it would take a lot of puzzling once the campaign was over- what to do with these kids? What to do with all the others like them? What to do with the whole of the German apparatus in the East for that matter- all the bureaucrats and slave owners, military officers caught up in sectarian feuds and religious communes, priests of a hundred stripes, industrial conglomerates and their front men, small farmers and their highwayman brothers. A hundred thousand lives or more, all intricately meshed into the slave and expansion apparatus. What could he do with them? Did he have any right to even ask that question? This flurry of thought swirled in him as he held out another puffball for Wolfgang to burst over the fire, an activity as old as human inhabitation of the land he imagined. Time for questions later, out of the comforting warmth of the august sun and the glow of the little afternoon cook-fire.

Three Days Out

Thick stripes of summer barely flowed green and gold across the flat plain, stretching away in miniscule bands of color under the titanic sky. The streaks of sherbert orange and royal purple dyed by clouds and invisible smoke from the Siberian blazes transfigured the sky and the endless expanse of grass colors that he could not describe. The heat of the afternoon was beginning to dissipate into the bruising eastern sky, and the sounds of wildlife, rodents and insects were rich as they prepared to bed down or rise according to their habit. Hide tents, held up with long poles of Ural ash had sprung up around the cook-fires, and their miniature brothers-teepees of rifles and rocket-grenades joined them, glinting gunsmoke gray as when the last rays of light caressed them. The dry smell of burning dung and grass, fuel on this wasteland devoid of anything more than shrubs was ripe in the air, mixing with the

scent of roasting mutton or stewing rabbit, mixed with local onions and bitter grasses. He felt a sense of unease now at the light which streaked the western sky. J-35 Hasid heli's had hit a band in their tents the previous evening. He hadn't seen them, but the sound of High Explosive rockets had echoed across the prairie followed by the buzz of something like swarming locusts- they had found the group, men and women, even some children, more herders interested in selling their sheep and horses to the Great Host than real combatants, scattered across red-painted grass, fragments of bones. Impossible to tell which group they had come from, and with fear setting in, the party that had found them was in a real Georgian standoff when Jo's group had reached them. Was it unkosher to not give them last rites and a burial, or was it spitting in the face of Tengri-Sky-God to cover their remains instead of leaving them to join the high-flying spirits of their ancestors, the vultures? Instead of letting it come to blood, Jo had pretended to recognize a Pomorskoye cross of simple carved pine on- well, in the area of something like a pulped pomegranate. Perhaps they had been pomorskoye, perhaps Orthodox- equally likely as Muslim, and he figured some kind of rights and a cremation was a fair compromise.

Now he scanned the horizon with his eyes and ears, peering in silence, back to the tents, like an old sailor looking across flat water- "Red Sky at night, sailor's delight" he murmured. Nothing out there but silence, no loathsome buzz of the gunships coming towards their happy band. He could not shake the feeling in the pit of his stomach- that if he had had his shortwave, if he could have communicated to his group back their, just to scan the radar, even for a moment- but that life was dead and gone, swallowed into the maw of the frontier like some offering before an angry God. Wasn't it just punishment for his misdeeds, for his part in building the world that had spilled into the frontier, for simply having been born into it and deciding to go on living? And yet, his life, even a hundred thousand like it- would that be enough to appease the Frontier and stitch the wound in humanity closed in brotherhood? What would it take to render justice, punishing and absolving on men like those in the choppers, the ones making the choppers, the cow-herders moving a ten thousand head herds from the expanse of the Donn steppe to the slaughterhouses of Khanstadt to feed the chopper-men and the ones who built the killing tools? The horizon was darkening now, and still silent.

You could see a patch of light, like a bud signaling a blossom, on the western horizon. For the moment both celestial giants were still abed. Above the hint of a blooming onion moon, twin jewels or teardrops in the sky hung suspended divinity, and nothing but bubbles of gas and stone. Here he felt unobserved by anything but his own heart. Marat and his pesky camera, Maria Plamya and her political considerations, the Security Staff and their constant hunt for genetic concerns and 'socially maladaptivism', his own officers looking for political loyalty, the whole of society searching and demanding for a good cog in their immense machine never mind the end. There was nothing around him now but the world, and his heart was what was in him holding him to account alone; and there it knew itself and was itself. He felt able to look into himself and judge without the constant pressure of self-hate and fear of the apparatuses of other people. He sucked in a lungful of air, cycling streams of atoms exchanged from him and the plants and the horses in one great repeating loop.

Someone was pushing through the tail prairie grass, not yet grazed to stubble by the horses, the grass swishing around them. A little voice announced that it was

Wolfgang, heralding the completion of the evening stew. He plucked a little feathery topped strand of the barely and stuck it in his mouth feeling like quite the country-man as he wandered back towards the pot of warm stew with the boy in tow. His sprig of barely bobbed up and down across his vision as he meandered to the fire where the blackening dung mixed with the shadows from the spurts of flame and the glow of coals. He had scavenged a little aluminum pan from the aftermath of the battle, much lighter and less brittle than the clay cup he had been borrowing around. Stewed gamey meat, tender and loose, with the rich and sweet onions and bitter taste of the grass, some toasted stray barley to crunch on, he felt comfortable again, staring at the narrow point of the fire, managing to ignore the smell of dry digested grass, feeling a rich warmth in his stomach against the coming cool winds of night. He saw the brother-boys off to their tent, and then returned to his bed-roll by the fire, feeling unobserved and profoundly empty- tranquil even- for the first time in what seemed like a long time. The moon was rising, a bright and happy disc that cast the world in a stunning dazzle of blacks and silvers, turning the rippling grass around the grazed part of the camp into an ocean of shadow and light, swaying and churning like the sea, and despite the bright light of the moon, he fell into slumber.

Two Days Out

A night of burning moon-light led to fitful dreams despite the sense of the sea of tranquility. In them he was back on his training ship, an old Destroyer, patrolling the baltic, standing in the watchtower, stilled to the edges of his mind on some amphetamine, staring into the endless churn of gray-green foam and dark waves, looking for any patterns that might be a periscope stalking them. Now though, the waves were the silver-black dazzle of the steppe under the moon, and the winds that blew them had a distinctly wolf-like howl. Somewhere in that ocean of swaying fibers of plant, he felt an alien presence hunting him, always out of sight, always elusive, just at the edge of his vision, and then-

He woke to Marat's black silhouette against the bright white horizon of dawn, heard a chuckle and a laugh, and then the casing of the camera snapped shut. Blinking sent waves of grass, spirals and swirls of fifty different sizes and shapes of spikes and heads and ears, klaidescopng behind his eyes like ghosts of a dream he couldn't quite remember. When they opened again he realized it wasn't Marat, but Friedrich the boy, and it wasn't a camera, but Jo's own handgun. That heavy cold-steel of barrel wavering and trembling a foot south of his face. He was no gunfighter, but neither was the boy- that didn't make the gun less dangerous dangling so. Breathing deep, the fresh air of the grassland filling his living lungs, he pushed himself up and then propped himself on his elbows. Speaking in a low and (what he hoped was) soft voice "Easy there boy, let's move easy and slow now." The kid's face was obscured by his own shadow and Jo's straining eyes. In the left half of his vision another silhouette started to minarette into frame. Marat? No, it was just Wolfgang, far too short to have been anyone else- "Stop- hold there Wolfgang" he said, terse and then terser, trying to keep his voice calm and safe. Friedrich kept the gun leveled at him.

"Steady, boy, steady. Keep the barrel level Friedrich." Eight months back he might have longed for the fantasy of a situation like this- justice meted out for damages done to his own criminal nation. Now? With the grass breathing out warm oxygen, exchanging it with him and the horses he was in the habit of borrowing? With the dawn light streaming into his eyes across this free steppe where life was hard and

short but also clearly his own, simple and understandable? No, he wanted to keep living. "You've every reason to want blood for your Father's death. I can see that." But why his blood? Hadn't he taken in the boy? He wasn't the one assaulting a deathtrap of a machine-gun bunker compound in the middle of Russian and Kazakh and Bashgir land. He wasn't the one who had invaded a quiet place bringing children along in tow. Still, if this was divine judgment... "We can talk about this though. You'll have a lifetime to get justice done for the violence here. We don't need to do anything that you might regret for-" Friedrich found his voice, high and loud and occasionally cracking with emotion "Fuck you! Fuck you, you goddamn batshit Red loving savage! My father is dead. 'We' won't do anything. I'm the one who's got the gun, not you! You can't do shit" It sounded like tears were breaking out down his face, pouring rain through the gaps in the firmament of his visage cracked by his breaking voice. The gunbarrel was black and empty, a void and a zero point, a bad omen of a negative sun, a pure shade of vacuum glaring at him. His throat, dry already from a night on the dry steppe, seemed to rasp. "Look, you've got my gun boy. You can do anything with it-but be careful. Think. What will the Reds, the real Reds, people who have been scalped by Germans, and yes- scalped their fair share back- what will they do when they hear a gunshot? What will they do to you and your brother?" Friedrich turned his head towards Wolfgang, and in the rising light glinting off the amber-green fields details of emotion, doubt and anger and a sudden childlike look of confusion and unseeing flashed. That was enough for someone without the reflexes of a gunfighter to grab the gun from a kid, and God willed it, he did.

Living was enjoyable, but he still felt for the farm boy. Rough situation. After wrestling his gun back, he knocked the kid down with a smack proportionate to his size multiplied by the serious shit he had felt staring at the steel sphincter, and then pulled him up to his feet. They joined the other riders, a mix of wizened mountain men and hard plains traders, young farmers, families fleeing the fires of the East, former slaves looking for their families, about twenty head in all for each fire, five or so tents and others sleeping in bedrolls. It reminded him nothing so much as the photoshoots from the early days of the frontier, wagon trains of pilgrims pushing into a hostile land of bushwhacking and guerilla fight, only now this host was streaming back towards the land they had once made hostile. The only thing that was mixing were the oxen trains- here there were only horse and sheep. He tried not to notice that, but they seemed to haunt him, that personal crime of Doing Nothing but Paperwork with which he had damned himself to the last layer of hell. Of course, many had come west on the trains or in the long aluminum camper trucks, hauling farm machinery and grain contracts; but that was less fighting for this band of romantic cynics and brutal fighters.

Thinking of the cattle, and how the herds here were nothing like those inoculated rivers which flowed into The City west, Marat entered his mind. He had vanished like a ghost on the plains- and come to think of it, their liaisons with Plamya and the political center had broken down. They seemed to be slowly ambling west- well, such a worrisome thought before his hot breakfast tea was no good. He pulled out the precious tin he had traded for from some teenager who was looting the wreck of the Panzer's, took the black grains of dry leaves, and sprinkled them into his aluminum bowl. He sure hoped someone else had gotten busy with the hot water while he was wrestling with a gun, but out here- expect the worst, prepare for the best.

One Day After

Firebird's muscles pulled tight around his shoulders, jostling the loose saddle blanket side to side with every gallop. Marat felt that he was probably safe, but it felt good to move, to dash with haste, to cover such ground during the day. Precious cargo, a solid data drive, swung in the leather satchel twined into the saddle. It was this that all the spilled blood and tears, months of long hard work, years of planning, decades of indignity and rage had resulted in. More than any had dared hope. He supposed that cults of martyrs stretched back, long into history, maybe longer than history. If he felt cynical, he might have opined that whoever was under the boot made much noise, and as soon as they had finished lacing up themselves would just as quickly make others squeal. It was impossible to feel cynical, alone on a dashing white mare, painted in flames with red ochre, flags streaming from the bridle and gusts of sunshine rippling down the greasy grass paths. Some would try and claim the martyrs for one cause or another, Holy Russia or the Red Banner, but he knew- they were martyrs of conviction in their own free will as all martyrs must be. That cause, Human Freedom, so eloquently thundered forth by his namesake more than two hundred years ago- that cause, Sweet Reason, burned and bled into three hundred acres of prime prairie land- that cause, in opposition to the ten thousand jack-boots of greed and cheating advantage which backed by steel marched into this free and great land. And here, in a little piece of Asian silicon and gold, he had a living memorial, a true testament and witness for the world, that they could see with their own eyes.

It took five days of hard riding for Firebird to take them North to the southernmost hill convent. Some of them were real monastic gardens; others hard working farm communities; others still bands of bandits, miners, and whores, keeping up a religious pretext for protection and funding from one of a dozen church men who felt too queasy to call for the removal of christians. Well, the further removal- the hills were not exactly edenic. At nights, Marat would orient his bed roll with the moon and the North star, keep the drive wrapped tightly to hide it from the moistures of the night which would have fried it's delicate circuitry, and slept with one eye open in case any genuine outlaws were roaming the area. Those types tended to run for the hills when the Army rode through, but odds were they were too busy aiming to squabble over the pickings from the burnt out tanks to mind a single horseman. This was, he thought, the worst part of the plan- one man, alone on horseback? Easy pickings for anything bigger than a vulture out here. It couldn't be helped. A general panic had to be prevented, and besides (he told himself) if the Germans hadn't set a little holocaust on the prairie, it would have been a disaster to desert. This was the final chamber of the conspiracy- a single Radechnik radar operator in Germany, professing himself eternally loyal to The Cause, had given them the heads up.

Each morning he would sweat himself awake with a start, realizing he had fallen too deeply asleep and expecting to see a hatchet or bayonet driving into his skull; each morning he was saved. Perhaps this was the Historical Dialectic in motion, himself predestined to cross the plain. Perhaps that was rank peasant superstition. He would roll his bedroll back into a saddle, wander with Firebird to the west until they hit a creek to water her at, hope that there wasn't oil or chlorine in the river bed, and then saddle up towards the North. There was a lot of room for thinking and a lot of time for contemplation. Mostly he just let the wind, History, flow over his dry face and smooth chin, but sometimes he'd think. Perhaps the strangest feeling in this plan was one of minuteness. Probably ten thousand lives, young and burning or old and hopeful or miserably dutiful had been erased, and he had been knowingly spared, for what? Just to do his duty and carry a disk, something a child could have done? Maybe as a

man he should have intervened, called out “Fire! Fire! The Germans will bring Fire!” He told himself no one would have listened. No one had listened the first hundred times the Germans had done that, over confident in the Civility and Trustworthiness of the Great Father of Culture. For all the high art that culture contained, it was too naive and insecure to be fully human, like a child. What did that make an uncultured red savage like him? Well, if he was insecure about the humanity of his recent inaction, he could always fall back on it- he had been chosen by the Party to bear Witness and carry this last testament, and if it was unmanly, he was a Red first and a man second, maybe. It was hard not to feel doubt under the great sky dome and the ocean of flat land, failed farms and virgin prairie.

It was equally hard to hold those doubts for more than a moment. Firebird was as sure-footed as they day she had been lassoed, sure still for the long ride that she had spent the spring and summer doing. After this season- if there still were seasons- he ought to retire her, give her a green pasture and all the sweet corn she could manage. For the moment they forged on. There would be an uplink site to the German cyber grid, the global cyber grid even maybe, and from there-

The full message was meant for anyone who cared about humanity more than the Saxon racial state. Cheery couples and devout nurses, brave men and their faithful horses, brilliant military minds and crass angry peasants, righteous slaves and cruel bandits out for scrap alike, saved in digital memoriam for the world, martyred in the greatest pyre of Baal yet constructed.

It had been a coup to get the Navy man. Yes, he was a drunk. Yes, he was probably a war criminal, although now he was dead in a very self-justifying fashion. But he had also been a man, capable of laughing and sharing moments with the men and women from across the immensity of the frontier, able to listen well if not speak clearly, and willing to help out with work, collecting water or feed grass or fire dung. Caught on camera, it was sympathetic and hopefully relatable to some of the German bastards. Combined with the children that he had taken with him- well it was downright charming. And who had flown the killing birds loaded with uranium over those children? When made to see what they had done, perhaps there was hope for a better world where people might see themselves for what they were, and sing in unison of human freedom. Maybe.

Firebird’s bristly mane shone like broken glass in the wide expanse of steppe sun. He felt alone today, the three days of isolated travel wearing away at the tethers of his mind. Doubts flooded him. German atrocities- what else was new? It was just some backwards hilly frontier full of violent savages. Who would really care? But it wasn’t about the atrocities or the indignities or the violence. It was about putting a face and a story and a should on and behind and within each of the people. A good story- justice and humanity fighting crime and inhumanity. All it would need to do was stand up against the silly critique that it wasn’t entirely pacifist in the face of a marauding army of tanks bent on torching villages and putting their flocks to the sword. Quibbles, stupid arguments, dead ends that the enemy propaganda would play up- hopefully the human factor would simply sidestep that, broadcast the inhumanity of the enemy simply through the humanity of themselves. That was the plan anyway, and he had faith in that.

He felt a relieved escape from this inner monologuing as the long wooded hill of the Convent rose into view. As they never did well drawing undue attention to themselves from the locals, the Convents were usually well holed up in the hills, and

this one was no different. At the tree line he was met by Sister Sara herself, who ran the “nunnery”, and handed over the satchel. Within the week, the huge digital file would be spreading along the tendrils of copper, glass, and antenna, reaching the world and infiltrating the minds of assembled humanity. His task was done.
